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Oedipus on the Nile:  
Translations and Adaptations of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Egypt,  
1900-1970

Raphael Christian Cormack

PhD Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

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**Declaration**

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself and that the work contained herein is my own, except when it is explicitly stated otherwise in the text or references. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Signed:

Raphael Christian Cormack

13/01/2017

## **Thesis Abstract**

Between 1900 and 1970 seven different versions of Sophocles' play Oedipus Tyrannos were performed or published in Arabic in Egypt. This thesis looks at the first 71 years' history of this iconic Greek tragedy in Arabic and the ways it can be used to think through the cultural debates of the period. The long history of contact between Greece and Egypt and the 19th and 20th century interpretations of this history can be used to look at different models of colonial and post-colonial cultural interaction. Classicism offered Egyptian writers a constructive way of looking at their cultural identity and contemporary world – a way which takes in to account the legacies of colonialism but also engages Greek literature to create their own models of nationhood.

Following the history of performance and adaptation of the play throughout the 20th century, this thesis offers close readings of the most prominent adaptations of Oedipus, particularly those of Farah Antun (whose text was used for Actor-Director George Abyad's first version of the play in 1912), Tawfiq al-Hakim (1949), Ali Ahmed Bakathir (1949) and Ali Salem (1970). Using performance and translation theory, I show how performance of translated plays like Oedipus was a crucial but complex part of the formation of an Egyptian dramatic tradition through the dynamic interaction of diverse views of what the theatre should be, using, for instance, the role of singing in turn of the century drama. This thesis also revisits and revises misconceptions about the relationship between Islam and theatre. In addition to examining Egyptian Oedipus' 19th and 20th century context, I also stress the contribution of performance and adaptation to readings of the original text. In particular, these versions of Oedipus ask questions about monarchical rule and democracy that form one link between this classical play and 20th century Egypt.

Through its interdisciplinary approach as well as the close readings it offers, this thesis aims to make valuable contributions to the fields of Arabic Theatre Studies and Classical Reception in Colonial and Post-Colonial contexts as well as Performance and Translation Theory.

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### **Abbreviations**

**GEBO:** General Egyptian Book Organisation [*al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al- 'Āmma li-l-Kitāb*].

**MQAAK:** 'Awad, Ramsīs. *Mādhā Qālū 'an Ahl al-Kahf* [What They Said about People of the Cave]. Cairo: GEBO, 1986.

**OC:** *Oedipus at Colonus*.

**OT:** *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

**STMM:** *Silsilat Tawthīq al-Masrah al-Miṣrī, 1876-1922* [Series for Documenting the Egyptian Theatre, 1876-1922]. 11 vols. Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Masrah, 1997-2003.

### **Referencing Guide**

As is convention, I to refer to Classical texts by book title and line or section number rather than page number. Details of the texts can be found in the bibliography. For *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Colonus* I have used the Budé texts as it can be established that these were used by Taha Hussein. For everything else I have used the Oxford Classical Text.

For the first reference of an Arabic text I give the full transliterated title and translation. For subsequent references, I give the translated title and the transliterated Arabic name of the author.

Referencing follows the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

### **Transliteration**

In Arabic, I transliterate using the IJMES system. In quotations and book titles I follow the conventions used by the author.

### **Translation**

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Several of the texts are available in English. Al-Hakim's, Bakathir's and Salem's adaptations are available in Marvin Carlson's edited collection *The Arab Oedipus: Four Plays from Egypt and Syria*. New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2005. Translations from the Quran are from Marmaduke Pickthall's version, cited in the bibliography.

## Introduction

Oedipus: Antigone, child of this blind old man, to what land have we come, to a city of what sort of men? Who will receive the wandering Oedipus on this day with simple gifts?

Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*<sup>1</sup>

Oedipus himself speaks the first lines of Sophocles' play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, as a blind, wandering exile, searching for a place where his body can be finally laid to rest and where his heroic power can settle. Sophocles situated his final resting place in a small town just outside Athens. In my thesis, he comes to Egypt. Oedipus' journey there and the milestones, tracks and turnings along the way make for a rich and complex story, as do the thoughts and motivations of the people who received him in Egypt and integrated him into their own literature.

In the period from 1900 to 1970 seven different versions of Sophocles' classic play *Oedipus Tyrannos* (*Oedipus the King*, written and set before *Oedipus at Colonus*) were published or performed in Egypt. Some of these were translations of the original; some were reworkings or adaptations of Sophocles' play; the first was a translation of Voltaire's adaptation of the play. Amongst the authors were some of the most important figures in nineteenth and twentieth century Egyptian literature: Najib al-Haddad, Farah Antun, Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Ali Ahmed Bakathir, Ali Hafez and Ali Salim. Many of these works have been studied individually in both Arabic and Western languages but in depth engagements with the phenomenon as a whole are rare.<sup>2</sup>

My argument is that through these versions of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, we can trace a history of Egyptian theatre that began to assert itself as a literary genre in the late nineteenth century and, by the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser's death in 1970, was a central part of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Oedipus at Colonus* (Henceforth: OC), 1–4.

<sup>2</sup> We will go on to look in more detail at a number of works which include discussions of Arabic Oedipus. The more significant in depth Arabic works on the subject have especially focused on comparisons between French and Arabic adaptations of the play rather than direct comparisons to the original, e.g. Ibrahim Hamada, 'Treatments of Sophocles' Oedipus the King in Contemporary French and Egyptian Drama' (PhD. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1968). English translations of al-Hakim, Bakathir and Salem appear in Marvin Carlson, *The Arab Oedipus: Four Plays from Egypt and Syria* (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2005). In the introduction to this and a number of articles Carlson has traced a rough history of Oedipus. I will go into much more detail.

Egyptian literary canon and public culture. Through this timeframe, *Oedipus Tyrannos* can guide us through the important debates surrounding the theatre and attempts, by theatre practitioners at each of these moments, to define Egyptian drama.

The history, in the Arab world, of intellectual currents and cultural figures, which, like Oedipus, could be conceived of as ‘Western’ or ‘European’, has been an important subject of study in recent years. Much of this work aims to deconstruct the simplistic view that European ideas or literature wholesale entered an empty space in the intellectual tradition of the Middle East and argues that the process was much more complex and creative.

Marwa Elshakry’s *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, which deals with the history of Arabic engagements with the works of Darwin and theories of evolution, argues that we should look at these phenomena in a global context. From the late 1860s, Arabic writers and intellectuals were creating their own “readings” (an important word for Elshakry) of Darwin, which differed significantly from European readings and fused influences as diverse as Herbert Spencer, Aristotle, al-Jahiz and Ibn Rushd. She argues that everywhere across the world writers and intellectuals were engaged in a creation of their own Darwin; the Arabic version was at once connected to the rest of the world as well as to local concerns and traditions. Omnia El Shakry, makes a similar argument in her article on ‘The Arabic Freud’, showing how Arabic scholars drew, for instance, on Sufi conceptions of the self to construct their own Freud, rather than simply incorporating a ‘Western’ idea unchanged.<sup>3</sup>

Margaret Litvin’s *Hamlet’s Arab Journey* looks at this cross-cultural traffic from another angle. As well as looking at the changes that happen as people in the Arab world interact with these ideas, she also questions the purity of these ‘original’ Western cultural products. In a model she calls the Global Kaleidoscope, Litvin looks at how Arabic theatre practitioners engaged with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. She concludes that their view of *Hamlet* was filtered through so many different versions, especially French and Russian, that it became impossible to tie its origin to any one country, not even to Britain, where it was written. It is, therefore, mistaken to think that the play came to the Arab world as a pure, unchanged and unchanging, cultural artefact.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Omnia El Shakry, ‘The Arabic Freud: The Unconscious and the Modern Subject’, *Modern Intellectual History* 11, no. 1 (2014): 89–118.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey: Shakespeare’s Prince and Nasser’s Ghost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 6–8, 53–90.

Instead of seeing this period as one of a passive East receiving Western ideas, these scholars see it as more profitable and more accurate to view this period as one of global cultural exchange. Theories and writings were moving around the world rapidly in the nineteenth and twentieth century and people were fashioning diverse intellectual raw material into something new, locally specific and globally connected.

This thesis is influenced by these attempts to break down these strict lines between cultures and cultural products. Its basis is that there is no authentic, pure culture, whether 'European' or 'Arabic', but that every culture is constantly reforming itself under different influences. A focus specifically on these versions of *Oedipus Tyrannos* shows how this can work in one particularly revealing case.

Ideas about theatrical performance and theatricality give us a rich and unique way to unpack this dynamic construction of culture. For this to be helpful we should not see the performance of a play, simply, as the re-enactment and replication a pre-defined set of rules and conventions on the stage that is repeatable at different times or in different places. Rather, there is a constant renegotiation and reconstruction of a text every time it is enacted, taking influences and cues from diverse traditions and from different styles and techniques available to the practitioners. With its focus on the construction of cultural traditions, the scholarship on cultural formation in the Arab world in the nineteenth and twentieth century is based on ideas central to theatricality. So, theatre is a particularly useful medium through which to look at this topic.

To show precisely how theatricality provides a good model for cultural exchanges, we must turn to Arabic theories of translation that were being debated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and use their insights in the field of performance. Focusing on Sulayman al-Bustani's [1856-1925] introduction to his translation of the *Iliad*, I attempt to shift the focus of translation theories away from the source text and towards their effect on the target language.<sup>5</sup> Literary critics in the twentieth century have been primarily concerned with the fidelity of the translations to the original text but Arabic translators themselves were often more interested in how the act of translating new texts could shape and change the Arabic language. Translating a text can re-form the target language in several ways, from introducing new words to uncovering neglected and unused words that were somehow lying dormant. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century Arabic ways of thinking about translation have many parallels

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<sup>5</sup> Sulaymān al-Bustānī, trans., *Ilyādhat Hūmirūs: Mu'arraba Naẓman wa-'alayhā Sharḥ Tārīkhī Adabī* [*Homer's Iliad: Translated into Arabic Verse with Historical, Literary Notes*] (Cairo: al-Hilāl, 1904).

with more recent theories of the creative ways that differing cultural influences are incorporated into Arabic literature more broadly.

If our model of culture is of something that is fluid and constantly reshaping itself, not as a static entity, we need to answer the question of how to include historic cultures in this construction. The historical roots of Egyptian culture were extremely important to many writers of the time. Islamic and Pharaonic history, for instance, are key influences that people drew on to construct their work and its place in the world. We must not ignore the importance of history in the shaping of the present but nor should we view history as an objective, unchanging part of a culture either. Rather, I argue that people at certain moments use (and create) their cultural history in different ways as a means to think about their own times. This is not to say, for instance, that Pharaonic history automatically flows in the blood of Egyptians *but* that it can be, and is, used in such a way that means it is undeniably an important – if fluid – part of modern Egyptian culture.<sup>6</sup>

There were, however, several different versions of national history that could be used by nineteenth and twentieth century Egyptians to think through their own modern identities; this is where the question becomes more interesting and contested. A focus on Oedipus allows this thesis to look at one of the more complex parts of Egyptian history and one that offers a particularly instructive way to look at historical cultural constructions in the modern period more generally: ancient Greece.

Egypt's historical interaction with Greece began at least as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. After Alexander's conquest of Egypt, it was controlled by Greek, Ptolemaic rulers until conquered by the future emperor of Rome, Augustus. For the next half-millennium, its dominant culture remained largely Greek (though with undeniable local specificities), embodied traditionally in the city of Alexandria and its famous library. Greek history is unquestionably part of Egyptian history but we must ask: in what way?

Several recent works of scholarship consider the role that Pharaonic history played in twentieth century constructions of the Egyptian nation.<sup>7</sup> Greek history has not been so widely

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<sup>6</sup> For a general history of Egyptian nationalism and its use of history see Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Donald M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?: Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002);

examined in this Egyptian context.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it is an extremely useful case study through which to explore modern uses of Egyptian history and it highlights the different ways that the past can be used in the present to construct a sense of national identity. As I discuss fully in chapter three, it was often used to argue several different points: that Egypt is a historically cosmopolitan crossroads; that as a society it is more part of Mediterranean culture than “Eastern”; that it is a country colonised from early in its past by “Western” invaders. It is this multivalence which makes Greek history in Egypt such a productive way to examine how people use different conceptions of the past to think through their present.

More widely, the study of the reception of ancient Greek history and literature in the post-colonial world is growing. African and Caribbean re-use of Latin and Greek, for instance, and its negotiation with the colonising powers has led to the expansion of the now major discipline of Classical Reception. In this context, Egypt offers a rare case study. In the modern world, it is a country that has been subjected to colonial occupation and varying levels of foreign control subsequently, comparable to other area of colonisation and control. Egypt’s position in relation to its Classical past was, however, significantly different to almost anywhere else in the world. In other colonial contexts like West Africa or the Caribbean, the Greeks and Romans came with the foreign power and were part of the colonising culture. In Egypt, the British, with their long tradition of classical education, could and did lay claim to the Greeks; but so too could Egyptians, on their own terms. In fact, Egyptians could well argue that they were more justified in considering themselves heirs to Greek civilisation than the British were.<sup>9</sup>

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Donald M. Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> A few notable exceptions stand out. In English Peter E. Pormann, ‘The Arab “Cultural Awakening (Nahḍa)”, 1870-1950, and the Classical Tradition’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 13, no. 1 (2006): 3–20; Peter E. Pormann, ‘Classics and Islam: From Homer to al-Qā’ida’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16, no. 2 (2009): 197–233; Peter E. Pormann, ‘Greek Thought, Modern Arabic Culture: Classical Reception since the Nahḍa’, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 3, no. 1–2 (1 January 2015): 291–315. Donald M. Reid, ‘Cromer and the Classics: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Greco-Roman Past in Modern Egypt’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (1996): 1–29. Likewise, a number of Arabic studies of theatre devote sections to the question but seldom whole books. See e.g.: Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Hajjājī, *al-Uṣṭūra fī-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Mu’āṣir, 1933-1970 [Myth in Modern Egyptian Theatre 1933-1970]* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1975); Nādiya al-Banhāwī, *Budhūr al-‘Abath fī-l-Trājjīdiyā al-Ighrīqīya wa-Atharuhā ‘alā Masraḥ al-‘Abath al-Mu’āṣir fī-l-Gharb Wa-Fī Miṣr [The Roots of the Absurd in Greek Tragedy and Its Influence on the Modern Theatre of the Absurd in the West and in Egypt]* (Cairo: GEBO, 2006), 295–370. One exception is the playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim whose work has been analysed in Arabic and French from this angle (chapter four).

<sup>9</sup> A number of books have appeared recently on African and post-colonial Classical Reception such as Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie, *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University

It is the particularly close relationship between Egypt and Greece (and, in Alexandria, what could be called Egypt's temporary cultural hegemony over the Greek world) that separates Greek history from Roman history. Egypt was also an important part of the Roman empire and its Roman history could be a rich area of study; for instance, both the British and the Egyptians shared the status of provinces in the Roman empire, a history that could break down the boundaries between coloniser and colonised, historically. But the issues and connections associated with Greece are specific and they are different from those associated with Rome. Although the two are often conflated under the term 'Classical', it is Greece as an idea and as a constructed history that is important for this thesis.

This relationship between Greece and Egypt in the twentieth century is most often seen through the writings of the figures of 'Cosmopolitan Alexandria', such as C.P. Cavafy and E.M. Forster. Broadly speaking, the writers I am looking at were not very interested in 'Cosmopolitan Alexandria', nor was 'Cosmopolitan Alexandria' very interested in them.<sup>10</sup> This thesis looks at writers who primarily wrote in Arabic, a language that authors such Cavafy did not read, at least not on a literary level.<sup>11</sup> It attempts to reveal an alternative cosmopolitanism that was being debated amongst the Arabic speaking writers of Egypt, whose work was largely excluded from those elite Europeanised circles or ignored. Yet, they too were using the Greeks to debate Egypt's place in a globalising world.

E.M Forster's guide book to Alexandria devotes little space to the Arabic culture of the city. He says of the medieval Arabs that they "were anything but barbarians; their own great city of Cairo is a sufficient answer to that charge. But their civilisation was Oriental and of the land; it was out of touch with the Mediterranean civilisation that has evolved in Alexandria." Later, describing modern Alexandria, he says that "Politically she is now more

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Press, 2007); Barbara E. Goff and Michael Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Justine McConnell, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939*, 2013. However, Egypt seldom features, except in the important but vicarious role that it plays for writers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, as both Greek and African. Two exceptions are Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley, *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 343–72. Also: Ahmed Etman in Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Literature and Culture (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 141–52.

<sup>10</sup> For some evidence of the Greek population of Alexandria's interest in Arabic translations of ancient Greek work see Manolis Margolis, 'From Ancient to Modern: Greek Literature Translated to Arabic', in *Classical Papers vol. IX: Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Translation and Cultural Interaction'* (Cairo: Cairo University, 2009), 105–12.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ideal Library', Cavafy Archive, accessed 28 December, 2016, <http://www.cavafy.com/archive/vlibrary/list.asp>. This reconstructs as far as is possible Cavafy's library and it includes no Arabic books and not even an Arabic dictionary.

closely connected with the rest of Egypt than ever in the past, but the old foreign elements remain, and it is to the oldest of them, the Greek, that she owes such modern culture as is to be found in her.” Forster’s separation between Arabic and Greek is something I implicitly challenge. Oedipus’ journey in Egypt shows that, although the terms of the debate might have been different from Forster’s and Cavafy’s, many Arabic writers were just as interested in Greek history as their “cosmopolitan” counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

Where scholars have turned their attention to Arabic-Greek cultural interactions, it is usually seen through the lens of the medieval translation movement in the court of the Abbasid Caliphs such as al-Mansur, al-Mahdi and al-Ma’mun. In the ‘golden age’ of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and beyond significant proportions of Greek philosophy, science and medicine were translated into Arabic. Of course, Arabic and Greek culture have never been entirely separate. However, this thesis takes a different approach and looks at something that is absent from studies of the Abbasid period: literature – and particularly drama. It is in the nineteenth century that literary works are translated into Arabic on a large scale. This second Greek translation movement is the focus of this study.<sup>13</sup>

Questions of cultural exchange and cultural identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries form the foundation of this study; the play *Oedipus Tyrannos* itself and its adaptations and translations give it structure. It is through this classical play that I pose my central questions.

The Oedipus myth has a long history, going back, albeit it in a brief reference, to the Homeric epics. It is through fifth century B.C. Athenian drama that his story is best known to the modern world. The myth was adapted by all three major tragedians Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides but Sophocles’ version is the only one that survives in its entirety.

The plot of this play takes place in the space of a day. It opens with Oedipus, the king who has come to power by saving the city from the Sphinx, emerging on stage to comfort the people of Thebes, now ravaged by the plague. He assures them that he has sent his brother-in-law Creon to consult the oracle and find a cure for the plague. Creon, upon his return, informs Oedipus that the disease is the result of pollution caused by the murder of the former king,

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<sup>12</sup> E. M. Forster, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (London: Michael Haag, 1986), 85, 103. First published 1922.

<sup>13</sup> On Abbasid translation movement see: e.g.: Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society* (London: Routledge, 1998).



Laius. To end the plague Oedipus must drive the murderer, who is still present in Thebes, out of the city and Oedipus vows to fulfil this divine instruction.

In his search for the guilty man, Oedipus questions the blind prophet Tiresias, who reveals that it is Oedipus himself who is Laius' killer. However, he refuses to believe this and so angrily dismisses the old seer. As the narrative moves on, it is revealed that Tiresias was right that Oedipus was the cause of this pollution. What is worse, Oedipus also finds out that, in line with an oracle he had been given at birth, Laius – whom he had slain without recognising – was his father, and his wife, Jocasta – whom he married after the murder – is his mother. It transpires that, unknown to him, he was born in the royal household of Thebes and taken to Corinth as a baby to be raised by the royal family there, in order (unsuccessfully) to avoid the consequences of the oracle. When he hears about the oracle first, he tries to flee Corinth and the people he believes to be his parents, only to arrive in Thebes. Throughout the course of this play, the truth is slowly revealed and Oedipus must accept his crimes. Jocasta hangs herself in shame and the play ends as Oedipus gouges out his own eyes and leaves the stage.

Of course, it is impossible to view this play in total isolation from what has come after it. Many Egyptian writers connected *Oedipus Tyrannos* and its story directly with *Oedipus at Colonus*, the play in which Oedipus wanders in exile, even though it was written 20 years later.<sup>14</sup> In analysing these engagements with *Oedipus Tyrannos* it would be wrong to ignore the play entirely; nor can we totally cast aside the debates about fate or the psychoanalytic theories, which came long after the play was first written. Still, as much as possible, I focus on issues that arise from this play itself. *Oedipus Tyrannos* was not written to be part of a series with *Oedipus at Colonus* and Sophocles was not Freud.

In 1968 Ibrahim Hamada wrote his PhD dissertation on modern French and Egyptian adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which he later published in Arabic.<sup>15</sup> His discussion of George Abyad's version is very brief and due to the date of publication he could not, obviously, have discussed Ali Salem's version. The discussion he devotes to al-Hakim's and

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<sup>14</sup> The date of *Oedipus Tyrannos* is still contested. Based on historical and literary references Bernard Knox, 'The Date of the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles', *The American Journal of Philology* 77, no. 2 (1956): 133–47 proposes 425 B.C. as the most likely date. Based on similarities with Euripides' *Hippolytus* another date, 429 B.C., is proposed by R. M. Newton, 'Hippolytus and the Dating of Oedipus Tyrannos', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 21 (1980): 5–22. The date of *Oedipus at Colonus* is also uncertain but consensus puts it in the 400s. see: Adrian Kelly, *Sophocles: Oedipus at Colonus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 14–18.

<sup>15</sup> Hamada 'Treatments of Sophocles' Oedipus the King in Contemporary French and Egyptian Drama'.

Bakathir's versions of the play is primarily concerned with the dramatic successes or failures of the plays and their direct relationship with Sophocles. My work seeks to go further and interrogate the broader thematic, literary and cultural issues that arise from the play. I use close readings to try to open up larger questions.

Egyptian performances and adaptations have all derived their own messages from Sophocles' original and have used the play for their own ends. It has been argued by Nehad Selaiha that political readings of the play dominated adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in twentieth century Egypt.<sup>16</sup> I would like to be more specific and ask *how* the play is political and how Oedipus was used to think through the political questions of the time. The theme that repeats itself again and again in Egyptian versions of the play is the question of the role of a ruler and his relationship to the people; something that resonated with democratic and anti-colonial debates throughout the period. More often than not, the people share in the responsibility for many of the errors of rule that surround them. It is significant that in all three later adaptations of the play (al-Hakim, Bakathir and Salem), the Sphinx is shown to be a false external enemy and the riddles that must be solved lie within the city.

In-depth study of these versions of *Oedipus Tyrannos* is also a window into the formation of a defined theatrical tradition in Egypt. Oedipus, along with the wider history of ancient Greek theatre, was used by many theatre practitioners to think through the construction of an Egyptian theatre tradition. Greek tragedy offered a model to emulate or to react against that could be detached from the European theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and offer Egyptians a way of theorising their own theatre not simply as an emulation of Europe. By looking at performances and the debates around them at the time, this thesis rethinks the supposed antagonism between Islam and theatre that recurs in many works on Arabic drama.

As well as shedding light on modern Egypt, studying the reception of *Oedipus Tyrannos* also allows for new or unusual readings of the original play. Through close readings of these Egyptian translations and adaptations of Oedipus, aspects of the ancient play which have not always been the key focus of study emerge. In this case, the questions that Egyptian authors ask about the politics of leadership are increasingly being discussed in current scholarship on Greek tragedy.

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<sup>16</sup> Nehad Selaiha, 'Oedipus in Egypt', in *Receptions of Antiquity*, ed. Jan Nelis (Gent: Academia Press, 2011), 153–60. Esp. 157. Reworked from an article that appeared in *al-Ahram Weekly* 6-12 December, 2001

My study is divided into six largely chronological chapters, each of which focuses on a specific Egyptian text, or group of texts, from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. Some of these are famous works with a place in the Egyptian canon, others are little known or only partially preserved, and must be reconstructed from recordings and reviews. I draw on a wide range of sources and critical discussions: academic literature, the contemporary Arabic and French press – often hard to access – and archives. In one case I was able to interview Ali Salem, the author of *The Comedy of Oedipus*. As well as the major themes – the development of Egyptian theatre, the questions of cultural authenticity and their interaction with the contemporary political world – the chapters are linked by other topics from the contested role of singing in Egyptian theatrical performance to the complexities of translation. The close-readings of different adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannos* offer new interpretations of the plays themselves but also add up to a bigger, and innovative, picture of Egyptian culture over the period.

The first chapter analyses the beginnings of this theatrical tradition in Egypt. While performance had long been part of Egyptian culture, when Abu Naddara performed the first European-style play in Arabic in 1871, there was a sense that a new genre – “drama” – was being created.<sup>17</sup> Looking particularly at early incarnations of Oedipus on the stage, this chapter shows how theatre practitioners took influences and performance style from a range of places to shape what they thought their theatre should be, without ever simply imitating the ‘West’.

This chapter focuses on translation as a way to see this construction in action. We can attempt to break down lines between performance and translation, showing the productive parallels that can be drawn between the two. If we view performance as, in some ways, a type of translation and translation as a kind of performance we can situate dramatic production in the wider cultural context of the time. Looking at Sulayman al-Bustani’s *Iliad* and his introduction to the text, we can see the theories of translation at the time were expounding a new model of cultural exchange, not emphasising imitation but the re-formation the Arabic language. The theories about translation provide an important foundation for the rest of the study. Throughout the twentieth century the questions raised by this chapter are answered in many different ways by Egyptian writers.

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<sup>17</sup> Adam Mestyan, ‘Arabic Theatre in Early Khedival Culture, 1868–72: James Sanua Revisited’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (February 2014): 117–37.

The second chapter continues these debates and shows how they are enacted in the first production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Arabic: *Ūdīb Malikan* [*Oedipus the King*]. Performed in 1912 by George Abyad's [1880-1959] troupe at the Cairo Opera House, it was a landmark event both for the history of Oedipus in Egypt and for Arabic theatre more broadly. The chapter uses the play to explore competing views of how theatre should be performed in ways that were appropriate for Egypt. It focuses, in particular, on the place of singing within the Egyptian theatre and, using the two figures of Abyad and the singer-actor Salama Higazi [1852-1917], shows how we can negotiate this thorny issue. For many critics, singing was leading the theatre on a vulgar and decadent course but it was also hugely popular with theatre audiences. The antagonism between different performance traditions has often been used to enact a battle between 'Western' and 'Egyptian' styles of theatre. I propose instead that Abyad's performance of *Oedipus Tyrannos* can be seen as one moment in a wider, global movement of modernist theatre. I argue that we can profitably look at Abyad's production, together with ones from France, Britain and Germany, as engaged in the same debates not working against each other.

With Abyad's production we have the first major and important version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Egypt and the chapter closes by looking at the play and the context of its performance. I show how this first production of Oedipus laid the ground work for future ones, by engaging with specific aspects of the Sophoclean original. Some of the formal decisions made by Abyad in presenting his adaptation stressed, implicitly at least, the political questions of rule that became central in later adaptations.

By considering the writings of Taha Hussein [1889-1973] from the early 1920s until the late 1940s, the third chapter confronts one central question of this thesis: what role can ancient Greek history have in modern Egyptian culture? One of the most important critics and writers of the mid-twentieth century, Hussein was the first person to write extensively and influentially on the place of ancient Greek literature and history in modern Egypt. Therefore, we can use his work to build some conceptual models to help understand how this complex history was used in twentieth-century Egypt.

Beyond that, using the work of two modern scholars, Peter Pormann and Shaden Tageldin, I attempt to show that Egyptian engagements with ancient Greek culture and history are an excellent way to look at how national history is constructed in the colonial and post-colonial context of Egypt. The idea of "Greece in Egypt" forces writers to confront head on how concepts such as cosmopolitanism and power relations become difficult or thorny in a colonial setting. The legacy of the ancient Greeks could be constructed in several contradictory

ways, as colonial invaders, as partners in a broader Eastern Mediterranean culture, or as some form of global cultural possession which is the monopoly of no specific country. It is for this reason and because of these contradictions that the ambivalence of colonial cultural production, in Egypt and beyond, can be powerfully theorised through them.

Hussein is a particularly important figure in this thesis because, it is in the wake of his work that Oedipus' Greek roots begin to show most clearly, both in the debates around the play and in its texts. Hussein was also the first person to use Sophocles' Greek text of the play for his own translation. The chapter looks at Hussein's translation of Oedipus to illustrate the possibilities and the problems that are raised by his ideas about the place of that Greek literature in modern Egypt and its relationship to Europe.

Chapter four is focused on a single play and on the issue of how a writer could consciously alter Sophocles' original to produce an entirely new Egyptian adaptation and what it would mean to make it 'Egyptian'. The play is Tawfiq al-Hakim's [1898-1987] 1949 *Oedipus the King* [*al-Malik Ūdīb*], the first Egyptian adaptation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* to not just translate the play but significantly change its action. Coming from a new generation of writers, al-Hakim started his writing career in a cultural space that had been deeply influenced by the debates around culture and theatre discussed in the first three chapters. His *Oedipus the King* was an attempt to make a play that embodied his own views on Egyptian theatre and to show how a modern Egyptian writer could use the country's ancient Greek heritage to his own advantage.

The chapter highlights a number of important alterations Tawfiq al-Hakim made to the Sophoclean plot, including his disavowal of divine aspects of the narrative and his controversial decision to make his Oedipus urge Jocasta to continue in their sexual relationship even after the discovery of the truth of his origins. Al-Hakim used these changes to interrogate his views on fate, politics, metaphysics and "reality". In particular, they bring more of an explicit focus onto the uneasy nature of monarchical rule and the relationship between a ruler and "the people" and turn *Oedipus The King* into even more of a political play, influenced by the political atmosphere of post-World War Two Egypt.

The fifth chapter takes the opportunity to discuss the relationship between Islam and theatre and rebut claims that Islam is inimical to drama because of its uneasiness with representation of living beings. "Islamic" arguments against theatre are, in fact, very close to anti-theatrical arguments at other times and in other places. They also share much with "secular" worries about the morally corrupting power of theatre that were being aired in Egypt

at the time. In fact, if theatre was used in a positive way to promote Islamic messages, it worried very few people.

Ali Ahmed Bakathir's [1910-1969] 1949 *The Tragedy of Oedipus* [*Ma'sāt Ūdīb*] is the only explicitly Islamic adaptation of the play. Although Tawfiq al-Hakim wanted to make his adaptation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* acceptable to an Islamic audience, it was not a religious adaptation of the play in the way that Bakathir's is. Both plays were published in the same year and this chapter argues that it should be seen against the same political background as al-Hakim's version and that it engages with similar political issues.

The chapter looks specifically at the role in the play of political allegory, a common theme in much Arabic literature and literary criticism. In Bakathir's adaptation, allegorical interpretations are stretched to their limits. In the mid-1950s the author offered his own allegorical reading of the play but it is one that does not seem to fit in at all with the events of the date of its publication, creating more problems than solutions. Building on the writing of Walter Benjamin on the concepts of allegory and symbol, this chapter argues for a more creative engagement with allegory as a form of writing.

The sixth and final chapter follows Oedipus as he enters the post-revolution and then Nasserist period of Egyptian history, from 1952 until Ali Salem's [1936-2015] 1970 adaptation of the play, *The Comedy of Oedipus*, in the last year of Nasser's life. Here we have the most radical divergence from the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, turning it into a comedy and altering much of the plot. I argue, however, that it can be productively read alongside the original, in a way informed by earlier Egyptian adaptations of the play. Salem's version is clearly situated within the Egyptian tradition of Oedipus but it also engages with the new political situation in Gamal Abdel Nasser's [1918-1970] Egypt.

The Nasserist period opens up new discussions about Egyptian theatre, its genealogy and its relationship to Greek drama but ones that clearly have their roots in the debates that the previous chapters have analysed. Yusuf Idris' [1927-1991] 1964 Manifesto "Towards an Egyptian Theatre" rejects Greek drama as a model and, in a series of articles, argues for an "authentically" Egyptian model of theatre, based on folk traditions in the country. Ali Salem's play adds a further angle to debates about the place of Greece in Egyptian culture. Influenced by Étienne Drioton's work on the influence of ancient Egyptian theatre on later Greek theatre and Immanuel Velikovsky's view that the Oedipus myth was based on Egyptian history, his adaptation of the play positions the ancient Egyptians as the true fathers of Greek culture and Greek plays as really 'Egyptian'. In an argument that foreshadows later scholarly work such

as Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, Salem's version of Oedipus allows Egypt to claim Greek drama as its own and wrest it from European chains.

My thesis ends in 1970. This is not because Oedipus stops being performed on the Egyptian stage. In fact, the conclusion briefly discusses Fawzy Fahmy's [b. 1938] version of Oedipus, *The Return of the Absent* [ʿAwdat al-Ghāʾib], which was first performed in 1977 (although written in 1968). The period covered by this thesis does, however, form of unity of sorts from the British occupation, through the form of parliamentary democracy of the interwar years and past the revolution of 1952 and the 1956 expulsion of British forces from the Suez canal zone. In this period, too, Egyptian theatre goes through many changes from the early experiments of the late nineteenth century until the so-called Golden Age of the 1960s.

I do not want to propose a teleological view of the Egyptian Oedipus or Egyptian theatre more generally, with Ali Salem's production representing the end of a natural development of the Egyptian Oedipus. At the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* when Theseus, King of Athens, has granted Oedipus his resting place outside Athens, he promises that no-one will disturb the tomb. Addressing the people Theseus says:

Children, that man told me that none should approach that place, nor make mention of the sacred grave, where he lies. He said that, if I did these things well, then I would keep the land free of pain for ever.<sup>18</sup>

The Egyptian Oedipus is different. He derives his power from being dug up and rearranged, not from being left to lie in peace. The play always provides rich opportunities to look at important questions through a particular lens. Different theatre practitioners used Oedipus in different ways to produce theatre that responded to the issues of their time and ask many of the same questions. The model of translation proposed in the first chapter which sees every performance as a constant re-formation of the theatrical language, can help us to reconstruct Oedipus all the time, always changing and reacting to the world around him.

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<sup>18</sup> OC 1765–70.

## **Chapter One: The Beginnings of Egyptian Theatre**

In the introduction to his translation of the novel *Atala* by Chateaubriand, the Syrian-born author Farah Antun [1874-1922] reflected on the process of translation. He began by quoting two lines of poetry.

“The poet said:

Only the person afflicted by passion [*al-shawq*] really knows what it is

And only the one who suffers love [*al-ṣabāba*] truly knows what it is”

Antun then takes this poetic image and applies it to his process of translation:

[Likewise] we say that only the person who has translated a novel like *Atala* knows the difficulty of writing. For moulding its meaning into suitable Arabic, capturing its intention completely, ... and putting its European, American and Indian borrowings and images into Arabic words and Arabic meanings, all of this strains the heart and the head of a writer, making sweat pour down his body even in days such as these when the weather is freezing.<sup>1</sup>

Four years after writing this, in 1912 Farah Antun completed the first translation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* into Arabic. This version of the play, as performed by George Abyad’s Troupe, will be the specific focus of the next chapter. The current chapter looks back before this to the growth of drama in Egypt and at the earliest representations of the Oedipus myth on stage. Before 1912, Oedipus had been a part of Egyptian theatre in many guises since the late nineteenth century, but not as a direct translation from Sophocles.

This period in Arabic literature, from the nineteenth to early twentieth century, is often referred to as the *Nahḍa* [Renaissance], in which there was an explosion in the number of translations, including many of the classics of European theatre. There are many important questions about how this rise of translation was theorised at the time and how it intersected with contemporary models of performance that were evolving in Egypt. I hope a focus on the development of theatre in Arabic will provide a new and useful way of looking at this translation movement too.

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<sup>1</sup> Farah Anṭūn, *Atālā* (New York, 1908). Cited in Laṭīf Zaytūnī, *Ḥarakat al-Tarjama fī ‘Aṣr al-Nahḍa* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1994).



There was a clear kinship between translation and performance at the time, which is sometimes reflected in obvious ways. Many of the most prominent and important translators of the time (Farah Antun, Tanyus Abduh [1864-1926], Najib al-Haddad [1867-1899], etc.) were closely involved with the theatre business and translated several plays. So, their translations have a fundamental relationship to performance. I argue that there are also deeper connections between performance and translation. As this chapter suggests, the underlying workings of both, in theory and in practice, have much in common. Connecting these two phenomena will help us to look at the *Nahḍa* and the role of translation in new ways, also offering productive models for genres other than theatre, such as the novel.<sup>2</sup>

Reconceiving of translation in this way allows us to question the construction of this early period of Arabic drama as merely a primitive stage in its development, which gives the training necessary to progress to the next natural stage, which is “original writing”. As Farah Antun’s opening quote demonstrates, translation is as much a difficult and creative process as composition. By emphasising the theatrical nature of translation, we can show how it is a creative act in itself and one that is actively engaged in the formation of and re-formation of a literary genre not only a precursor to its development.

By looking at translation and performance in this way, this chapter offers a more complex view of the origins of theatre in Egypt. The debate now is often focused on the origins of the genre. Some claim that drama was just an import from Europe; others, relying on shadow-plays and travelling farces, argue that there has been longstanding dramatic tradition in the Arab world, of which late nineteenth century theatre is a direct descendant, owing very little to European forms. I argue that theatre practitioners used both European plays and earlier performance traditions to create their own performance language, drawing different elements from a variety of sources.

All of this forms the background to Oedipus’ complicated entry in to the Arabic theatre in the turn-of-the-century. The early plays that explore the Oedipus myth provide us with case-studies through which to study this process of translation and performance in action.

### Sulayman al-Bustani’s *Iliad*

Sulayman al-Bustani’s 1904 *Iliad* is one of the most in-depth attempts to think through the act of translation in the period. The publication of this book was a hugely important moment in the history of modern Arabic letters. Not only was it the first ever complete

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<sup>2</sup> The same word (*riwāya*) is used for both novel and play at the time.

translation of Homer's Trojan epic into Arabic, but it was also a huge feat of literary accomplishment in its own right. The diplomat and writer, a member of the renowned al-Bustani family, which included the editors of the famous Arabic encyclopaedia as well as several poets and writers, spent a large amount of his adult life on the translation.<sup>3</sup> After 17 years of work, the book was finally finished and came to over 1,000 pages, comprising his verse translation of the text as well as a 200 page introduction that discussed Homer, Arabic poetry and his approach to translation.

It was launched at a large party on the evening of 14th June 1904 at the Shepherd Hotel in Cairo with around 100 literati from Egypt as well as the Levantine and Greek communities, who gathered for dinner on tables decorated with flowers, fruits, electric lights and cards calligraphed with 4 lines of Arabic poetry. Amongst the speakers were Rashid Rida [1865-1935], editor of the journal *al-Manār*, Ya'qub Sarruf, editor of *al-Muqataṭaf*, and Ibrahim Ramzi, editor of *al-Tamaddun*. Some could not attend but sent letters of apology; these included the famous Muslim reformer Muhammad Abduh [1849-1905], Sheikh 'Ali Yusuf, 1863-1913, editor of *al-Mu'ayyid*, and the renowned atheist writer Dr Shibli Shumayyil. All the company were effusive in their praise of this book and its author. Their adulation, on the whole, though, was not for Homer or the content of the *Iliad* but rather for the service that al-Bustani's translation had rendered to the Arabic language. 'Ali Yusuf, for instance, although he could not be present, sent a letter of apology that praised the book not from any specific fondness he had for ancient Greek literature but "because of [the book's] service 'to the Arabic language, to knowledge and literature'".<sup>4</sup>

Those in the audience from different cultural circles all shared this praise for the service the book had rendered to Arabic. Rashid Rida, the Islamic scholar and writer, gave a very interesting explanation of why he supported the publication. As one of the key proponents of Salafism in the early twentieth century and religious scholar who is associated with this orthodox movement, he might not be expected to appreciate a book filled with polytheism and pagan religion. He did, in fact, acknowledge that the Arabs had not previously translated the *Iliad*, in part, for religious reasons. He speculated that their rejection of Homer at that time was due to his depiction of "religious superstition, like the existence of a multitude of gods, which Islam came to eradicate not to commemorate after it had gone. So, the Arabs' neglect

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<sup>3</sup> Buṭrus al-Bustānī, the primary editor of the Arabic Encyclopaedia project, was Sulayman's uncle.

<sup>4</sup> *al-Hilāl*, July 1904, 575–7. *al-Manār*, 15 June, 1904, 274–6, *al-Muqataṭaf*, July 1904, 669–677. Yusuf's letter is partially quoted in *al-Muqataṭaf*, July 1904, 76.

of the *Iliad* was like their neglect of making physical depictions of things [*taṣwīr*] because depictions [*ṣuwar*] in their time were only for pagan ceremonies.”

His view for the present time was different. Now, it was time to translate the *Iliad* into Arabic without religious resistance. His justification for this opinion was not connected to the content of the epic but, like ‘Alī Yusuf’s praise, the benefits for the Arabic language. “Since the conditions have changed”, Rida continued in his speech, “God wants *this language* to have a new renaissance and literary men have felt a need for the literature of other cultures, of which the oldest and most famous is the *Iliad*”. When he wrote about the event in his journal *al-Manār*, promising to publish some selections in upcoming issues, Rida backed up his statements by quoting others at the party who called the translation “the basis of a revolution in Arabic literature.”<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad Abduh, Rida’s mentor and his colleague at *al-Manār*, wrote a telegram to the party expressing his thoughts too about the benefits this translation brought for the Arabic language. “If this is a battlefield in which the Arabic language has invaded its Greek relative [*ḍarī‘ataha al-yūnāniyya*: i.e. Greek, which was breastfed in the same place as Arabic, therefore its relative] then it has captured its virgin pearls, plundered its gems, and come back to us in the clothes of its literature... How beautiful this victory is, in a time when Arabic is weak.”<sup>6</sup>

Islamic thinkers were casting aside what they saw as past objections to Greek literature so that Arabic could be enriched. But it was not just the religious figures who were excited to see a revival in the Arabic languages. Before the launch party has started, Jurjī Zaydan’s [1861-1914] *al-Hilāl* had already argued that “the Arabic *Iliad*, due to the original poetic studies that it contains, is a worthy beginning for a renaissance [*Nahḍa*] in Arabic poetry.”<sup>7</sup>

The importance of these reactions is that they consider this to be a milestone in Arabic translation not just because it gave Arabic speakers access to Homer (or even primarily for that reason) but because of the effect it had on the Arabic language and literature itself. It was a common argument in literary criticism of the time that the importance of translation was the effect that it had on Arabic and not solely for the content of the original texts or the factual information that it brought into the language. This is an idea that al-Bustani also takes up in his introduction, which we shall return to later. In the case of theatre in Egypt in the nineteenth

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<sup>5</sup> *al-Manār*, 15 June, 1904, 275ff. It does not seem that he ever did put any selections in later editions of *al-Manār*.

<sup>6</sup> *al-Muqataṭaf*, July 1904, 673.

<sup>7</sup> *al-Hilāl*, June 1904, 524.

and early twentieth century this focus on how translation alters the target language (Arabic) becomes an extremely instructive way to theorise the beginnings of an Arabic speaking dramatic tradition too.

### The Beginnings of Arabic Theatre: Performance and Translation

Drama, in the sense of proscenium arch theatre, was something new to Egypt that was, in a sense, imported in the late nineteenth century; at least, this is how it was seen by theatre practitioners at the time.<sup>8</sup> Various dates have been proposed for the first “Drama in the Arab world” or “in Egypt” and there are debates about the precise moment that theatre touched down on the Arabic stage. It can be said confidently that Arabic drama did not become an important phenomenon in Egypt until the late 1870s at the earliest.<sup>9</sup> My priority, though, is not to attempt to isolate the date of the *first* Egyptian plays, nor of the *first* performances of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Egypt. Instead, it is to ask how specific plays and a broader tradition of European-style theatre were received in Egypt over the course of several decades and how contemporary theatre practitioners viewed and constructed their project and its history.

In the early days of Egyptian theatre, European plays – particularly those from the French Neo-Classical tradition – were the primary sources of material. Some of these were on classical Greek themes: Racine’s *Iphigenie*, which was rendered as *al-Rajā’ ba‘da al-ya’s* [Hope after Despair], as well as his *Andromaque* and *Phèdre* were translated. Others were on Roman themes; Corneille’s *Cinna* and *Horace*, for instance, were translated, along with

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century: 1799-1882* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996) has a good summary of the beginnings of Egyptian theatre as well as the earlier performance traditions of Egypt. Geert Van Gelder, ‘Najīb al-Haddād’s Essay on the Comparison of Arabic and European Poetry’, in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature*, ed. Jay Smart (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), 145–52 offers a convincing argument that Naguib al-Haddad’s essay on comparative literature is a subtle call for Arabic literature to import the new (European) genre of ‘Drama’ into their own literature. The question of the nature of previous dramatic traditions in Egypt and the Arab world, which people could exploit, is an important issue that will be discussed later in the chapter. Sirkku Aaltonen ‘Perspiring Translators, Rowdy Audiences, and Ignorant Women: Narratives of the History of Egyptian Theatre’ in Sirkku Aaltonen and Areeg Ibrahim, eds., *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre: Translation, Performance, Politics*, Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies ; 45 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 21–52 looks at the major anglophone works of the twentieth century that construct a narrative of Egyptian theatrical history.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Mestyan, ‘James Sanua Revisited’ isolates Ya‘qūb Sanu‘a in 1871 as the first instance of Arabic drama in Egypt. However, he argues that this performance did not have wide reaching influence and it was only later that troupes became more important. Mārūn al-Naqqāsh’s 1847 or 1848 *al-Bakhīl* (a version of Molière’s *L’Avare*), performed in Beirut, is usually posited as the first ‘Arabic’ play. However, Shmuel Moreh and Philip Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre: Plays from Algeria and Syria - a Study and Texts*, 1 edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45–67 argues for another instance in 1847.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Several works by Shakespeare (often via French translations), Victor Hugo, Molière, Voltaire and George Bernard Shaw were also among popular performances.<sup>10</sup> With notable exceptions such as Isma'il 'Asim, the playwright and occasional actor who renounced the courthouse for the limelight, original plays were in the minority until the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

These translated plays, which were in the majority, played a very important part in shaping the discourse and practice of Egyptian theatre. This is one obvious reason why we must think carefully about the role of translation when looking at early Egyptian theatre. The ways in which Egyptian theatre practitioners engaged with European drama were not simple. Theatre makers did not have a simple pre-existing model of performance into which they could put these European plays; nor did they blindly replicate European performance models on stage. In fact, the process of translating and performing the plays was an important part of the formation and re-formation of performance models. It is through the production of these plays that theatre practitioners and critics in Egypt were forced to confront and negotiate their own concept of Egyptian theatre.

It has often been said that performance of a play text is, in some way, a kind of translation. In order to create a compelling picture of late nineteenth century theatre and Oedipus' place in it, it is necessary to consider, in more detail, what theory can best elucidate the process in a dramatic context. We must look at the difficult issue of precisely *how* the act of performance can be conceived of as a type of translation. On a basic level, there appear to be obvious similarities between performance and translation. In both, the starting point is an ur-text that must be turned into something else. In the case of translation, it is being turned into another language and, in the case of performance, it is turned into action. One should, therefore, be able to compare productively between the two phenomena.

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<sup>10</sup> For a summary of many of the plays written and performed at the time see Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, *al-Masraḥiyya fī-l-adab al-ʿArabī al-Ḥadīth, 1847-1914 [The Play in Modern Arabic Literature, 1847-1914]* (Beirut: Dār Beirut, 1956), 193–444. Atia Abul-Naga, *Les Sources Françaises du Théâtre Égyptien (1870-1939)* (Alger: SNED, 1972). Often the route of entry was rather circuitous. Margaret Litvin, 'The French Source of the Earliest Surviving Arabic Hamlet', *Shakespeare Studies* 39 (2011): 133–51 shows that the source of Tanyus' Abduh's Hamlet was not Shakespeare directly but Alexandre Dumas père.

<sup>11</sup> On 'Āṣim's life and writing see Sayyid 'Alī Ismā'īl, *Ismā'īl 'Āṣim fī Mawḳib al-Ḥayā wa-l-Adab* (Cairo: Zahrā' al-Sharq, 1996).

However, scholars are also careful to point out that this equation can be problematic. There are key differences between the ‘translation’ involved in performance and linguistic translation.<sup>12</sup> Marvin Carlson notes the problems with this model:

The theorists who follow this approach are in part interested in elevating performance to a position of authenticity equal to that of the written text, but the parallel to translation does not entirely achieve this end. The more literally one takes the linguistic analogy, the more one foregrounds the script, the very thing these theorists are attempting to avoid.<sup>13</sup>

Susan Bassnett, too, shies away from making any exact equivalence between linguistic translation and performance. “We are often told [in a linguistic context] that things get lost in translation, that a translation is second best... but curiously in theatre the idea of loss is usually reversed. What we have instead is the notion of a play text which is somehow incomplete in itself until realised in performance.”<sup>14</sup> For both Bassnett and Carlson, translation is an uncomfortable metaphor to apply precisely to drama, as it takes the focus away from the performance and puts it on the written script, which should, for those involved in theatre, be the inferior partner of the actual performance.

Bassnett even suggests that our language that equates theatrical transposition with linguistic translation is flawed. “In the absence of a coherent terminology of its own”, she says, “English has tended to confound the act of translating a play text across languages with the act of transposing a written text onto the stage. Discussion of the problems of translating theatre texts has tended to confuse the two quite separate processes.”<sup>15</sup> She seems to suggest that using the term translation for both acts just leads to confusion.

If we are to construct a useful model that can bring performance and translation together, we must confront these objections. In particular, the focus of our thinking on translation must shift from the source language towards the target, bringing it in line with ideas about performance. If theatre, as a genre, should privilege the product (or the performance), so must translation.

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<sup>12</sup> Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, *Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984), 8 the author says ‘The dramatic transposition is a specialized form of translation, unique to drama and different from translating poetry or narrative prose’.

<sup>13</sup> Marvin Carlson, ‘Theatrical Performance: Illustration, Translation, Fulfillment, or Supplement?’, *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 1 (1985): 5–11. Quotation from 8

<sup>14</sup> Susan Bassnett, ‘Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre’, by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998), 90–108. Quote from 91.

<sup>15</sup> Bassnett ‘Still Trapped in the Labyrinth’, 94–5.

We should, then, look to theories of translation that examine the effect it has on the target language. Some of these have been developed in the context of the European tradition; George Steiner, for instance, wrote in 1975 that “the act of importation can potentially dislodge or relocate the whole of the native structure. The Heideggerian ‘we are what we understand to be’ entails that our own being is modified by each occurrence of comprehensive appropriation. No language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed”.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is to Arabic writers on translation from the turn-of-the-century that I propose we direct our study. Just as theatre practitioners were asking how to perform plays written from other traditions on the Arabic stage, translators were thinking about incorporating new texts and genres into Arabic.<sup>17</sup> As the comments from the *Iliad*’s launch party made clear, al-Bustani can help us think through issues such as the effect translation had on the target language, the revival of different modes of expression and the introduction of a new genre (epic) into the corpus of Arabic literature.

### Al-Bustani’s Theory of Translation

In modern scholarship, as well as amongst some contemporary critics, the estimation of Arabic translators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is often critical and negative. Arabic translators are said to have paid little heed to the original in their work. One often quoted example of this is the case of Tanyus Abduh:

He never followed the original or tried to convey its meaning. He translated anywhere and everywhere, regardless of his circumstances—in a coffee shop, on a sidewalk, on a train, even on the flat roof of his house. Abdu [sic] was, if we may believe one contemporary description, a walking library . . . He carried with him sheets of paper in one pocket and a French novel in the other. He would then read a few lines, put the novel back in his pocket, and begin to scratch in a fine script whatever he could remember of the few lines he had read.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George Steiner, ‘The Hermeneutic Motion’, in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 312–435. Quote from 315.

<sup>17</sup> Here the issues facing people writing early Arabic novels were extremely similar to these theatre practitioners. For an introduction to the novel in Arabic see Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983), 107. He says the source of this anecdote is *Majallat Sarkis* (1910). I have been unable to locate every number from 1910 but this anecdote did not appear in those I did find. It is, however, told, in the same basic form, in Karam Mulhim Karam, *Mukhtārāt min Karam Mulhim Karam*, *Manāhil al-Adab al-‘Arabī* 17 (Beirut: Maktabat Šādir, n.d.), 66–68.

This period has frequently been portrayed as an unfortunately unruly period of inaccurate translations that eventually gave birth to a more refined literary culture later in twentieth century. A 2006 essay by Samah Selim summarised the general critical opinion on the period from 1870-1919 as “on the whole a necessary, if faintly disreputable stage in ‘the modernization of [Arabic] imaginative literature.’” Selim calls for a reconsideration of this period and for a closer study of it as something interesting in itself, not just as a preliminary stage to greater works. She also suggests the dynamics of translation of the time should be seen as more than just bowdlerisation or “pseudotranslation”, arguing against “the most common trope used by historians of modern Arabic literature to describe the technique of the turn-of-the-century popular translation ... that of ‘mutilation’ (*tashwīh*).”<sup>19</sup>

By taking Selim’s work on the novel and its translators and expanding it into drama and performance, and by putting theories of translation by al-Bustani and others alongside the theatre of the time, we can find a model that further helps shift the focus beyond these questions accuracy and ‘mutilation’.

To move the debate away from the accuracy of any given translation to its source text is not to say that translators at the time never cared about fidelity. Sulayman al-Bustani himself is a good example of a translator who did care deeply about the source text. Over the course of his translation, he even learnt Greek so he could correct the inconsistencies in the French, Italian and English translations he was using.<sup>20</sup> Al-Bustani’s care to make his translation of Homer as accurate as possible often puts him in opposition to less meticulous translators like Tanyus Abduh. But by putting al-Bustani and Abduh *together* alongside many others and leaving aside questions of accuracy to the source text we can show how they are both involved in the same project to develop Arabic through translation.

The attendees at the launch party for the *Iliad* were not alone in welcoming it as a way to revitalise the Arabic language. Al-Bustani himself had dealt with this topic at length in his introduction and notes. One large section of the introduction (72 of the 200 pages) was entitled ‘The Iliad and Arabic Poetry’. It focused not on the Greek text but on the broader history of

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<sup>19</sup> Samah Selim, ‘The People’s Entertainments: Translation, Popular Fiction and the Nahdah in Egypt’, in *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature*, ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, and Sander Gilman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 35–58. This essay has influenced the basis of much of this thesis, as have articles that have come in its wake, such as Spencer Scoville, ‘Reconsidering Nahdawi Translation: Bringing Pushkin to Palestine’, *The Translator* 21, no. 2 (4 May 2015): 223–36.

<sup>20</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 69–71.



Arabic literature from the pre-Islamic poets until the present.<sup>21</sup> To further explore Arabic literature the explanatory notes that he added to the text were not limited to Homer and ancient Greece but he also “adorned [them] with roughly 1000 verses of what the Arabs have said that are similar to the *Iliad* or its events.”<sup>22</sup> It is clear from this that al-Bustani well understood the creative possibilities translation offered for the re-consideration of his own language and tradition.

These possibilities could work in a number of ways that we should interrogate closely. Translation can, for instance, shape a language by introducing new words, expressions and forms from the source language which did not previously exist in the target language. This aspect is not al-Bustani’s focus but it is something that others were exploring at the time.<sup>23</sup> Marwa Elshakry, for instance, has written about translating scientific terms into Arabic in the early twentieth century and how (particularly Darwinian) scientific terms, which did not have obvious equivalents in Arabic, were rendered.<sup>24</sup> There were two approaches to this process, called, in Arabic, either *tarjama* (translation) or *ta’rīb* (Arabisation). *Tarjama* meant basing the translation on a word that already existed in Arabic or finding an Arabic periphrasis. *Ta’rīb* meant simply transferring the word into Arabic characters. A letter sent by a reader to *al-Hilāl* in 1908 asked “What is the difference between *tarjama* and *ta’rīb*?”. The response gives the example of philosophy: a *tarjama* would be *ḥubb al-ḥikma* (love of knowledge) and *ta’rīb* would be *falsafa*.<sup>25</sup> The simplicity of this example obscures the difficulty of the choices that sometimes had to be made. Many different contemporary ideological and literary concerns needed to be negotiated. For instance, Elshakry’s discussion of Shibli Shumayyil’s translation of “materialism” shows the religious and cultural lines he had to negotiate.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 107–188.

<sup>22</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Although al-Bustani does not seem to want to incorporate Greek words into Arabic he does note that classical Arabic already included a few words of Greek origin such as *nūṭī* (Sailor: ναυς, ναυτης), *usṭūl* (Fleet: στόλος) and *līmān* (Harbour: λιμην): al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Marwa Elshakry, ‘Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics of Modern Science Translations in Arabic’, *Isis* 99, no. 4 (December 2008): 701–30.

<sup>25</sup> *al-Hilāl*, January 1908, 133–139. The questioner also adds “which is better for the Arabic language?”. Discussion of this takes up much of the response.

<sup>26</sup> Elshakry ‘Knowledge in Motion’, 714. Another interesting example of this is the incorporation of punctuation into modern Arabic. This is often discussed in writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For instance, Naguib al-Haddad criticises the way that translators haphazardly incorporate new punctuation signs like question marks, exclamation marks and quotations marks into their Arabic in *al-Ahrām*, 29 November, 1890, 1. See also: an article entitled ‘The Question Mark’ from *al-Hilāl* March 1912, 377–78.

It is possible to see the complexities of importing new words into the Arabic language in theatrical as well as scientific vocabulary. Theatrical terms had to be constructed anew, down to the very basics. Arabic, at the time, did not even have a settled word for “theatre” (the place where a play was acted). The two most common words were *tiyātrū* or *marsaḥ* but words such as *malhā* (place for entertainment) or *mal‘ab* (place for playing) were common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> As in the case of Shumayyil and Darwin, the specific word used is often decided after a considered set of choices. In the case of one article from 1900 in the journal *Miṣr* the writer uses the word *malhā* and criticises the choice that others make. “The general public here give [theatre] the name *marsaḥ* or *tiyātrū* and neither of the two words are at all correct for *marsaḥ* is a word that appears to be Arabic but true Arabic is innocent of it and *tiyātrū* is an Italian word, as we know.” The author has made a thought-out decision to use the word *malhā*, a genuine Arabic word rather than the Italian word or the false Arabic word. His choice of word reflects his argument in the rest of the article that theatres in Egypt only work for the benefit of Europeans in Egypt and not its Arabic speaking population. His attempt to find a word of good Arabic etymology when others did not is an expression of his desire to make theatre speak Arabic.<sup>28</sup>

Translation from one language to another can also attach new meanings to existing words in common use. This is something that al-Bustani exploits in his translation of the *Iliad*. When he comes across words that have no equivalent in Arabic, particularly gods and supernatural entities, he finds existing Arabic words that could be used. So *Nektar*, the drink of the gods becomes *Kawthar* or *Salsabīl* (the rivers of paradise) *Ate* (folly) becomes *fitna* (discord), *Deinos* (terror) becomes *hawl* (terror) and so on.<sup>29</sup> Karim Jihad Hassan criticises al-Bustani for translating the proper names in this way. He appeals to Derrida’s view that proper-names were untranslatable and that “depriving a text of its resonances and its proper names which become reduced simply to their meaning, is that not to take away a large part of its effectiveness and otherness?”<sup>30</sup> Yet, what it does is add new lexical categories to the Arabic

<sup>27</sup> Of many sources that could demonstrate, note one example of each from 1893 (a date selected more or less at random) to show that all 4 could be used: *tiyātrū*: *al-Muqaṭṭam*: 20 March, 1893 (*Silsilat Tawthīq al-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī, 1876-1922 [Series for Documenting the Egyptian Theatre, 1876-1922]*. 11 vols. (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Masraḥ, 1997-2003) (Henceforth: STMM ) vol. 2, 54), *marsaḥ*: *al-Mu‘ayyid*, 2 April, 1893 (STMM vol. 2, 55), *malhā*: *al-Muqaṭṭam*, 3 March, 1893 (STMM vol. 2, 54), *mal‘ab*: *al-Muqaṭṭam* 8 February, 1893 (STMM vol. 2, 53). *al-Muqataṭaf* August 1926, 223 also notes the appearance of *marzaḥ*.

<sup>28</sup> *Miṣr*, 6 April, 1900, 1 (STMM vol. 3, 259–62). In fact, from around the 1920s the word used for theatre (the building as well as the concept) is likely to be none of the 4 choices. Instead people began to use (and still use today) the word *masraḥ*, a corruption of *marsaḥ*.

<sup>29</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 78–79. *Fitna/Ate* see: 939 and *Deinos* see: 377.

<sup>30</sup> Khadim Jihad Hassan, *La Part de l’Étranger: la Traduction de la Poésie dans la Culture Arabe* (Paris: Actes Sud ; Sindbad, 2007), 200.

language; it gives a new set of meanings to Arabic words that already exist. This idea of *adding meaning* is similar to the concept of *tarjama*, but differs enough to be its own category. *Tarjama* is a creation of new words based on correct Arabic roots but this is a matter of using words that already exist for different means.

There is another, more complex way that translation alters the target language, which is raised in al-Bustani's introduction to his *Iliad* and which is particularly helpful when thinking about the development of theatre in the late nineteenth century. Al-Bustani proposes that the act of translation can unearth parts of a language that are lying dormant and revive them.

Over the course of his work, al-Bustani is constantly surprised by the richness of the Arabic language, in particular by the number of words that were used in early Arabic literature of the Jahiliyya [*Jāhiliyya*: lit. age of ignorance i.e. time before the coming of Islam in an Arabic context] but which are now out of use. It is specifically his choice to translate Homer (who represents the Jahiliyya of the Greeks) that makes him aware of this linguistic richness in the Jahiliyya of the Arabs and has helped him unearth forgotten parts of the language.<sup>31</sup> This goal is clear when one looks at his notes, which are full of explanations of particular Arabic words and long quotes from Arabic poetry which the passages of the Homer have brought to his mind:

I decided to attach to [the text] notes [*sharḥ*], in which I follow a new method – one that no commentator has taken recourse to before. The aim is that the Arabic reader should get used to [*ya'nas bi-*] going back to look at the customs of his own people [*ummatihi*] in their Jahiliyya ... and is amazed at the expanse [*ittisā'*] of his language in assigning [words] to all the 'natural meanings' [*kul ma'nā min al-ma'ānī al-fīṭriyya*] despite its inability, in the present, to render some contemporary situations [*al-awḍā' al-aṣriyya*].<sup>32</sup>

One of the key aims of the translation is to show the richness of Arabic. It is, therefore, in keeping with the aims of his project that the first note in al-Bustani's text is not an explanation of a Greek word but of the complex Arabic word he uses for Achilles' rage: *al-iḥtidām al-wabīl*, which he glosses as *al-ghaḍab al-shadīd al-mash'ūm*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 168–75 is a section dedicated to the comparison between the two Jahiliyyas. He does not conclude that they were exactly the same but there are enough similarities for him to think it worth dedicating a section of the introduction to the subject. On page 6, where he outlines what he has done in the introduction, he says that he has “faced the ancestral [*muḍarī*] language of the Quraysh with the Ionian language of the *Iliad*”. See also 107–09 for a discussion of the origins of Arabic poetry more generally.

<sup>32</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 203 n.1.

It is by translation – in this case translation of the *Iliad* – that we are made aware of the full lexicon of the language and its ability to deal with situations which one might not have known before the translation was attempted. “It was during the translation that the wealth of Arabic in its ancient signifying words [*al-alfāz al-waḍʿiyya al-qadīma*] became apparent to me as there was no need to corrupt the meaning in the way that some European translators had been forced to”. He says in the next paragraph that “It is known that the *Iliad* was composed in a time when the conditions of life were close to the conditions of the ancient Arabs. And so, the translator can face the meaning with a synonym from the Arabic language without corruption or [need for] explanation and the language is wide enough for that.”<sup>34</sup> The translator finds that Arabic is endowed with a surprisingly large vocabulary and one, as the notes make clear, that he does not expect most people to be familiar with.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Bustani goes further, arguing that it is not only lexicological breadth that this translation unearths but also new genres. Part of the reason al-Bustani wanted to translate the *Iliad*, he tells us, is that he loved the genre of epic poems but there were almost none available in Arabic.<sup>36</sup> As he goes on, though, he qualifies this statement. Later in the introduction he repeats his view that epic does not, strictly speaking, exist in the Arabic tradition: “We said that the Arabs did not compose epics and we are not claiming that there is anything in their language like the *Iliad* of Homer, the *Shahnameh*, or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, [at least] in living poetry [*al-shiʿr al-ḥayy*]”. However, it seems that as he translated the book he began to see connections between other Arabic stories and epics. He noted that the book of Job, which he believed to be Arabic in origin, had epic qualities to it. Then he went on to say that, in the Arabic Jahiliyya there was much that was similar to Homeric epic. There were similarities, for instance, in their polytheistic conceptions of religion. Likewise, the Arabs of the Jahiliyya also had heroes and leaders of their people who could be compared very easily to Homeric heroes. If one looks closely, one even begins to see a kind of epic poetry was part of the Arabic literary tradition. Al-Bustani mentions the war of al-Basus and says that “This war, the Arabs exchanged stories of its events and chanted its poems through the passing of centuries up to our time now and they moulded it in various models, none of the models fitted entirely into the mould of epic as the *Iliad* does. Despite this the words of verse which are said in them are

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<sup>34</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 193 [emphasis added].

<sup>35</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 1157–63 includes a glossary of Arabic terms that people may not understand. Al-Bustani adds in the introduction that he has tried to avoid such words as much as possible but it was sometimes necessary.

<sup>36</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 68. He uses the term “*qīṣaṣī*” here for epic poems like Milton’s *Paradise Lost* but later (162ff.) uses the term *malḥama*.

closer to narrative poetry than to music, so every poem of them is part of an ‘epic’ [*malḥama*].”<sup>37</sup> He never quite recants his view that strict *epic* does not exist in Arabic but as he continues in his project he begins to bring other Arabic literature traditions, including ‘folk’ literature that survives to the present day, into a new literary sphere.<sup>38</sup>

### Performance as Translation

The model for translation that we can construct from al-Bustani and his contemporaries offers a way to theorise performance in relation to translation productively. When one wants to put on a play in late nineteenth century Egypt the starting point is a text (which itself carries within it some assumptions of performance: speech, stage directions, acts etc.). The task of the practitioners is to “translate” the text, turning it into an actual performance. This is not a simple act. The ‘language’ of performance into which the text must be translated is not stable. As with translation, some things can be relatively simply enacted on stage from a text but other things require more thought. Some aspects of the text may need to be rendered on stage by creation of a new technique or by incorporating a kind of performance which has never been applied in this circumstance. It is in the ‘translation’ that the language of performance is altered and formed, just as with translation into Arabic.

The theatre movement in nineteenth century Egypt allows us to see this in clear focus. The majority of the texts being performed in Egypt were newly imported European texts, which carried with them an implication of a European-style of performance.<sup>39</sup> Whatever the character of earlier performance traditions in Egypt, theatre practitioners in the country must have been influenced by the European (mostly French or Italian) companies which they saw, and this must have gone some way towards dictating their performances.<sup>40</sup>

The complexities involved in acting these plays on stage mirrors the complex ways that Arabic could be altered by linguistic translation. Arabic theatre was not a simple case of performing a European play, in a European style only in the Arabic language. Performance

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<sup>37</sup> al-Bustanī, *Iliad*, 168–72. Quotes from 168, 170.

<sup>38</sup> For a summary of the Arabic epic tradition see: M. C. Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-Telling*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> In the case of *Oedipus Tyrannos* this is more complex, as I will discuss later, but it certainly holds for *al-Sirr al-Ḥā'il* and *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* and there is an extent to which this is true for Lacroix's translation of *Oedipus*. Lacroix's *Oedipus* carries hallmarks of European drama which would not have been in the original text (stage directions and scene and act divisions to name the most obvious examples).

<sup>40</sup> If they did not see these companies abroad there was ample opportunity to see the government sponsored European touring companies in Cairo or Alexandria.

traditions already prevalent in Egypt could draw audiences and affected how the plays were translated onto the stage. As I argued from al-Bustani's *Iliad*, it is *in* the 'translation' of the play texts to the Egyptian stage that practitioners are allowed - or forced - to form and then re-form an Egyptian tradition of acting.

By looking at performance in this way, we can complicate debates about the cultural roots of Egyptian theatre: whether the modern theatre in Egypt was an entirely European import or whether it was influenced by previous performance traditions.<sup>41</sup>

Nobody denies that modes of performance existed in Egypt before the late nineteenth century but general consensus up to the late twentieth century was that modern Arabic theatre as we know was a direct descendant of European theatre. M.M. Badawi makes this most clear in the first sentence of his book on modern Arabic theatre. "It is an established fact that modern Arabic drama was borrowed from the West independently by Mārūn al-Naqqāsh in the Lebanon in 1847 and by Ya'qūb Ṣannū' in Egypt in 1870." The Egyptian author Yusuf Idris, in trying to create his own version of Egyptian theatre based on indigenous performance traditions, argued that Egyptian theatre before the 1960s had been the "illegitimate child of this [European] theatre".<sup>42</sup>

Discounting the primacy of Europe in Arabic cultural developments and questioning such a direct link between the two, some have argued that modern Egyptian theatre was, in fact, more indebted to old performance models (such as shadow plays, travelling farce and story-telling traditions) than has been admitted. The more extreme proponents of this view have argued that Egyptian theatre was essentially Arabic in character and barely influenced by European drama at all. A more common view is that many of the performance tropes that exist in modern, so-called "European style" drama in Egypt are based on earlier local performance traditions that have continued into the modern age.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Philip Sadgrove, 'Pre-Modern Drama', in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 369–84 is a summary of pre-modern Arabic performance traditions.

<sup>42</sup> M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1. Yusuf Idris' manifesto 'Nahw Masrah Miṣrī' [Towards an Egyptian Theatre] appeared in *al-Kātib* (1) January 1964, 67–79, (2) February 1964, 109–120, (3) March 1964, 86–97. It has been reprinted in many places. I cite it from Muḥammad Kāmil Khaṭīb, *Naẓariyyat al-Masrah* (Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 1994), 595–694. Quote from 608. Pierre Cachia, 'The Theatrical Movement of the Arabs', *Review of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 1 (July 1982): 11–23 follows a similar line of argument but adds some interesting sources.

<sup>43</sup> The first view has been argued by Muhammad Yusuf Mustafa, 'Antecedents of Modern Arabic Drama' (PhD. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1967). The second can be found in e.g. Dina Amin, 'Egyptian Theater: Reconstructing Performance Spaces', *The Arab Studies Journal* 14, no. 2

This debate between European and Egyptian influences seems unlikely ever to be settled. Proponents from either side can, and do, take examples either of European plays or of non-European performance to back up their claims. The model of translation that this thesis uses allows us to look at the issue without getting embroiled in these arguments. Furthermore, rather than just saying that both sides can be right, it allows us to look at the formation of drama in turn-of-the-century Egypt in a way that focuses more on the product than the source. Rather than asking question about the fidelity, I ask how theatre practitioners created their own performance language from influences around them, both Arabic and European.

The search for a faithful literal translation of European theatre leads to confusion on all sides. Pierre Cachia quotes a traveller's account of a Lebanese performance in 1850 that said:

[The producers] had seen in Europe footlights and prompter's box, and fancied it an essential point of theatricals to stick them on where they were not required. In like manner, they introduced chairs for the Caliph and his Vizir, and Cheval glasses for the ladies.<sup>44</sup>

The traveller is left in amused perplexity after the troupe's mistranslation of key parts of European theatre but, if we put to one side the focus on fidelity, this Lebanese case can show the dynamic process of reformation that was happening in the theatre. Arabic players are taking parts of European performance and using them in new ways for their own context, even if these ways seem "wrong" to a European spectator. In other examples, we see practitioners reach for non-European performance traditions. As Dina Amin has shown, influences from the travelling farce players of Egypt also gave practitioners and audiences different ways to conceive of performance space that would have made little sense to European theatre practitioners. We can see the formation of something new from many diverse influences.<sup>45</sup>

'Ala Mubarak's *'Alam al-Dīn [Sign of the Religion]* gives us a contemporary example of the ability of performance to bring together different styles of theatre at one moment. In this famous four volume work an Englishman takes a Sheikh and his son on a tour of late nineteenth century Europe, explaining its curiosities. The second volume includes a large section on the intriguing phenomenon of "theatre". The Englishman explains it to the Sheikh, articulating its

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(2006): 78–100. See also: Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, "'al-Halqa" in Arabic Theatre: An Emerging Site of Hybridity', *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (2008): 71–85; Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> David Urquhart, *The Lebanon (Mount Souria): A History and a Diary*, vol. 2 (London: T.C. Newby, 1860), 179.

<sup>45</sup> Amin, 'Egyptian Theater', 87–91.

features and benefits. The Sheikh is impressed and notes its similarity to performance traditions that already exist in Egypt:

It occurs to me that the imitation [*taqlīd*], acting [*tamthīl*], and various skits [*al-al'āb al-mutanawwa'a*] that are in [the theatre] are like the travelling players that we have in our country known as *awlād al-rābiya* and the songs and tunes that are in [the theatre] are like the singers that we have.

The Sheikh, though, does not want to associate the theatre exactly with one of these other forms. *Awlād al-rābiya*, (“Sons of the hill”) was a name for travelling players in Egypt, which Shmuel Moreh says came from a particular 19<sup>th</sup> century actor called *ibn rābiya* but later applied to all such troupes.<sup>46</sup> These performances, though, the Sheikh says, do not have the morally improving aspect of the theatre. In fact, they “corrupt peoples’ morals” [*yu'aththir dhālik fī fasād akhlāqihim*] and do not have the serious aspect of the theatre. In the case of singing, this art is different from theatre because “it does not tell a story, neither of past events nor present ones, but is usually just words from love poetry or something else, repeated by the singer.”<sup>47</sup>

To separate the European influences from the Egyptian is difficult in this case. The Sheikh reaches for traditional examples of performance but he does not do this in isolation. It is his introduction to European theatre that makes him do it and, also, makes him *connect* these diverse modes of performance. Just as the process of translating Homer into Arabic had made unknown elements in the language clearer and unremarked upon “epic” qualities to Arabic literature appear, so the process of staging plays could bring to light theatrical traditions that were often overlooked.

### Performance as Translation: Oedipus – A Case-Study

Oedipus’ entry into Egyptian theatre is an excellent example of the complexity of the development of Egyptian theatre and its relationship to “European” and “indigenous” performance traditions. His first steps into this field were convoluted and winding; he appeared in several different guises. It was not from Greek that Oedipus first appeared on stage but through Italian opera and French drama.

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<sup>46</sup> Shmuel Moreh “Khayāl” in Julie Scott Meisami & Paul Starkey eds. *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1998), 441-42.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Alī Mubārak, *‘Alam al-Dīn [The Sign of Religion]*, vol. 2 (Alexandria: al-Maḥrūsa, 1882), 403–05.



There are two key moments at the beginning of Oedipus' journey into the Egyptian theatre. The first was 7<sup>th</sup> January 1896 when Iskandar Farah's [1851-1916] troupe performed *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* [The Hidden Secret] based on Metastasio's opera *Demofonte*, which was first set to music in 1733 and tells the story of the kingdom of Thrace and its complex royal succession.<sup>48</sup> The second was four years later in September, 1900 when Najib al-Haddad's translation of Voltaire's *Oedipe Roi* first appeared on the stage of the Abbas Theatre in Cairo.<sup>49</sup> Between these two, in 1899, an Italian version of Sophocles' play was performed by Ermete Novelli, but as my focus is on Arabic speaking productions I will not discuss this at length.<sup>50</sup>

There is no conclusive evidence that the parricide and incest in Oedipus' play was a particular reason for its slightly belated debut on the Egyptian stage. However, one criticism of the theatre, which did not mention Oedipus directly by name, seemed to reference the play:

A sage Greek lawgiver was once asked why he'd overlooked the provision of a punishment for parricide in his legal code. His reply was that he'd never imagined any Greek would dare kill his father. That statement of his did more to prevent the occurrence of that crime than describing the various penalties for committing it. That lawgiver refused to mention parricide in his law code, so what can you say when the very same thing is acted before your very eyes. These theatrical plots are loaded down with depictions of father-killers and men marrying their mothers or sisters.<sup>51</sup>

The importation of different versions of the Oedipus story shows how a long and circuitous process of translation and reworking, rather than simple imitation, brought the play in to Egypt. In fact, the labyrinthine and multifaceted history of Oedipus in the history of Egyptian theatre reflects the broader history of Egyptian theatre and wider

<sup>48</sup> *al-Muqattam*, 7 January, 1896 (STMM vol. 3, 13). It was also performed again the 26<sup>th</sup> January: *al-Muqattam*, 15 January, 1896 (STMM vol. 3, 16), *Miṣr*, 27 January, 1896 (STMM vol. 3, 19). This play's precise relationship to the Oedipus story will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>49</sup> The exact date of this is hard to narrow down. Najīb al-Ḥaddād, *al-Sirr al-Hā'il* [The Terrible Secret] (Alexandria: Gharzūzī, 1905), is quoted from the newspaper *al-Raḳīb* from September 1900 claiming that it was performed on the 8<sup>th</sup> September. However, *al-Muqattam* 11 September, 1900 says that it was performed "yesterday" making the date the 10<sup>th</sup> September. It is, of course, possible there were two different performances.

<sup>50</sup> Aḥmad 'Atmān, *al-Maṣādir al-Kilāsīkiyya li-Masraḥ al-Ḥakīm: Dirāsa Muqārana* [Classical Sources in the Theatre of al-Hakim: Comparative Study] (Cairo: al-Sharika al-Miṣriyya al-Ālimiyya li-l-Nashr – Lūngmān, 1993), 43. *Al-Ahrām*, 17 April, 1899, mentions Novelli's tour in Egypt but not his performance of *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

<sup>51</sup> Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī, *Ḥadīth 'Isā ibn Hisham: aw Fatra min al-Zaman* [What Isa ibn Hisham Told Us: Or A Period of Time], trans. Roger Allen, 2 vols (New York: New York University Press, 2015) vol. 2, 176–77. This is from June 1900, so if it is a reference to *Oedipus Tyrannos* it comes before any direct version has been performed on the Egyptian stage. The story of the Greek lawgiver is about Solon and is likely to have come from Cicero's *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*, 70 (perhaps via French). The connection to the theatre is al-Muwayliḥī's own.

issues surrounding the development of Arabic drama. It is, therefore, a productive way to work through this early period of theatre.

*Al-Sirr al-Maknūn [The Hidden Secret]*

*Al-Sirr al-Maknūn [The Hidden Secret]*, based on Metastasio's *Demofonte* illustrates not only the complexity of this introduction of *Oedipus Tyrannos* into Egyptian drama but also how translation could reveal and incorporate Egyptian performance traditions into the late nineteenth century stage.

Metastasio's opera was not an explicit version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* but it was clearly inspired, in part, by the story. The plot centres around a king of Thrace, Demofonte, who has been ordered by Apollo to sacrifice a virgin every year to keep the kingdom safe. Dirce is next in line to be sacrificed, even though the king does not know she is not a virgin but is actually married and has had a child by his son Timante. Dirce goes to the Oracle to try to find an answer to her predicament and is told "The wrath of heaven with you will subside when known to himself is the innocent usurper of a kingdom". As the play continues and Timante and Dirce seek permission to marry it is revealed that Timante is not actually the son of the King but of Dirce's parents, seemingly making them brother and sister and their marriage incestuous. In this version, however, there is a happy ending and it transpires that Dirce is in fact herself the daughter of the King (not the people who have just been revealed as Timante's parents) so the two can marry and Timante is a usurper of the kingdom because he is not truly of royal blood. However, when the truth is revealed he is pleased to hear it, as it means he has not been sleeping with his sister.<sup>52</sup>

Although this is clearly not the same plot as *Oedipus*, there are several significant similarities: the oracle of Apollo revealing the unknowing usurper and the hints at an incestuous relationship to name the most obvious. Metastasio himself references *Oedipus*, when Timante believes he has discovered that he has fathered a child with his sister he exclaims "Tracia infelice / ecco l'Edipo tuo".<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Pietro Metastasio, *Demofonte: Dramma per Musica* (Milan, 1753). The play was translated into English in 1767 by John Hoole in Pietro Metastasio and John Hoole, *The Works of Metastasio*, vol. 2 (London: T. Davies, 1767), 237–350. The quote is from Metastasio, *Demofonte*, 4: "Con voi del Ciel si plancherà lo stegno: / Quando noto a se stesso / Fia l'innocente Usurpator d'un Regno."

<sup>53</sup> "Unhappy Thrace / Here is your Oedipus" This line appears in Metastasio, Pietro *Demofonte: Drama Per Musica* (Rome: 1741), 65 but not in the 1753 edition.

The Arabic text of *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* no longer survives, and it would be easy for the connection between the play and the opera to pass unnoticed. It has been stated that the play is a direct version of *Oedipus Tyrannos*.<sup>54</sup> But some reviews of performances do survive, which allow me to propose *Demofonte* as the model. An article that appeared in *Miṣr* newspaper to announce an early performance of the play described it as a play that “represents [tumaththil] Greek customs in mythical times” and goes on to say that Salama Higazi will be playing Timante [Ṭīmānta] and that Ahmed Abu al-‘Adl would be playing Demofonte [Dīmūfūnta].”<sup>55</sup> So far as I am aware, nowhere else in dramatic literature is there a play set in ancient Greece, in which two characters with these names appear together. That is enough to confidently identify *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* as a version of *Demofonte*.

Oedipus, in the late nineteenth century, then followed Litvin’s model of a ‘Global Kaleidoscope’, by which the sources of any one play are so multiple that identifying one alone is neither helpful nor possible. It did not come to Egypt from Sophocles but, first, from modern plays that subtly referenced the Oedipus story. So complex were the different influences surrounding the theatre at the time that it is extremely hard to know even which version of the play the translator Salim Farnini used.<sup>56</sup> Metastasio’s text was later adapted by several authors in several languages.<sup>57</sup> Without a surviving text it is impossible to be certain which was the direct source for the Arabic version.<sup>58</sup>

The small notice in *Miṣr* also provides another crucial piece of information, one that illustrates one of the most important parts the process of translating a play to the Egyptian stage. One thing that dominated Egyptian theatre at the time was singing and music in the performances. Playing the main role in this play, Timante, was Salama Higazi, the biggest singing star of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century stage.<sup>59</sup> He was so famous that,

<sup>54</sup> STMM vol. 2, 9. Part of the confusion may arise from the similarity in names between *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* and *al-Sirr al-Hā’il* and the general fluidity of names of performances at that time.

<sup>55</sup> *Miṣr*, 27 January, 1896 (STMM vol. 3, 19).

<sup>56</sup> For Farnīnī as translator see: *al-Akhbār*, 12 November, 1898 (STMM vol. 3, 192).

<sup>57</sup> John Hoole *Timanthes: A Tragedy* (London: T. Becket & Co, 1770), Jean Francois Marmontel and Luigi Cherubini [Music] *Démophon: Tragedie-Lyrique* (Paris: P. de Lormel, 1788), Philippe Desriau *Démophon: Opera Lyrique* (Paris: P. de Lormel, 1789).

<sup>58</sup> There is a good chance it is from the Italian version. Almost nothing seems to have been translated directly from English at the time so that is unlikely. It is not probable that it was translated from the Marmontel as that version does not include any character called Timante (changing the name of Demophon’s son to Osmide) but there is a chance that it is from Desriau’s text. However, the fact that the names in Arabic end in ta marbuta (*Ṭīmānta* and *Dīmūfūnta*) suggests that it may have come from the Italian. If it had been from French we might expect *Ṭīmānt* and *Dīmūfūn*.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, ʿĪzīs Fathallah, *Salāma Hijāzī* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2002); Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Ḥifnī, *al-Shaykh Salāma Hijāzī* (Cairo: Dar al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1968). The most useful book on Salama Higazi is possibly still Muḥammad Fāḍil, *al-Shaykh Salāma Hijāzī* (Damanhour: al-Umma,

as Pierre Cachia says, “when, towards the end of his career, he was paralyzed, another actor substituted for him in connecting scenes, and he was carried onto the stage to sing the highlights”. Having him sing in your play guaranteed some degree of popularity.<sup>60</sup>

Born in Alexandria in 1852, he began singing as a child, often sitting for hours in Sufi singing circles, listening intently to the Sheikhs. He started reciting the call to prayer in local mosques from a young age and learned his traditional religious style of singing with teachers such as Kamil al-Hariri as well as Khalil Mihrim, who came from Cairo to train him. As a young man, he is said to have had a suspicion of acting, perhaps on religious grounds. However, some members of Yusuf Khayat troupe saw him singing at his sister’s wedding and they were so impressed with him that they wanted to sign him up right there. At first, he was resistant but after a while he was convinced to lay aside his worries and bring his voice to the theatre. He soon became one of the greats of late nineteenth century theatre.<sup>61</sup>

Salama Higazi was not the only famous singer who appeared on the Egyptian stage at the time. It seems that from at least the 1880s most troupes thought it necessary to include singers, often referred to with the religious appellation Sheikh. Besides Higazi, these included ‘Abduh al-Hamuli [1840-1901] and Muhammad ‘Uthman, as well as other less known names such as Murad Rumanu, Hasan Salih and Ibrahim Ahmed.<sup>62</sup> Several women also played important and well received parts. ‘Abduh al-Hamuli himself was married to the famous singer Almaz.<sup>63</sup> In newspaper notices of the time there are often references to singers including Malikat al-Surur, Kawkab, Latifa ‘Abd Allah, Layla and someone referred to as al-‘Alima.<sup>64</sup> Further details about any of these people are difficult to find.

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1932). It is this that is the source of the lyrics to many of Higazi’s songs but it is unfortunately quite rare. Adam Mestyan, ‘A Garden With Mellow Fruits of Refinement’ Music Theatres and Cultural Politics in Cairo and Istanbul 1867-1892’ (PhD. Dissertation, Central European University, 2011), 269–88 and Sadgrove ‘The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century’, 156–63 provide useful details on his early career.

<sup>60</sup> Pierre Cachia, *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 127.

<sup>61</sup> This life story draws on Fāḍil, *Salāma Hījāzī*, 10-26. The book is based on the author’s own research and recollections as well as interviews with people who knew Higazi and the family. As with much oral history, the factual details are open to question. This, however, has become more or less the canonical account of his life.

<sup>62</sup> For al-Ḥamūlī, Rūmānū and ‘Uthmān see Sadgrove, *Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century*, 155–57. For Salih see e.g. *al-Muqaṭṭam*, 23 April, 1895 (STMM vol. 2, 136) and for Ahmed see e.g. *al-Surūr*, 17 March, 1894 (STMM vol. 2, 108) or *al-Muqaṭṭam*, 14 October, 1893 (STMM vol. 2, 78).

<sup>63</sup> For details of Almaz and her troublesome marriage to al-Hamuli see Marilyn Booth, *Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 294–98.

<sup>64</sup> For Malikat al-Surur see: *Miṣr*, 12 January, 1898 (STMM vol. 3, 138) or *al-Akḥbār*, 20 November, 1897 (STMM vol. 3, 121); Kawkab: *al-Surūr*, 21 & 28 March, 1894 (STMM vol. 2, 113); Laṭīfa

Also, it can be hard to know in exactly what place singing appeared in different performances. Sometimes, the singing may have simply consisted of a few musical numbers after the performance. At other times, it is clear that singing is incorporated into the performance itself.<sup>65</sup> What we can say for certain is that singing, in whatever guise, must have been one of the major draws for a theatre-going audience. In one famous incident Higazi once attempted to perform a version of Hamlet without any songs and the audience were so outraged that he was forced to add some in for the next performance.<sup>66</sup>

The model of translation that we have constructed from al-Bustani's *Iliad* can help explain this element of Egyptian theatre. "Drama" was not something that could simply be imported from Europe nor was it something that was already present, lying dormant, in Egypt. Rather, performing texts brought together several different influences to shape and mould a 'language' in which the texts could be expressed on stage. As our earlier discussion showed, this could happen in several ways. Translation can shape a target language by introducing new elements. It can also do it by shedding light on overlooked elements in the language. In Egypt, this meant singing, which was extremely popular with audiences.

Traditions of singing, including religious singing [*inshād* or *dhikr*] as well as other secular songs, had a long history in Egypt and across the Arab world.<sup>67</sup> When performing a play, therefore, we have seen that those seeking to attract audiences often reached for it. Religious style singing was brought onto the stage and became part of the new genre.<sup>68</sup> Higazi's personal career development perfectly embodies the movement we have been tracing

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<sup>65</sup> 'Abdullah: *al-Mu'ayyid*, 18 February, 1891 (STMM vol. 2 24-5); Layla: *al-Muqaṭṭam* 20 October, 1891 (STMM vol. 2, 31); al-Ālima: *al-Ahrām*, 29 February, 1892 (STMM vol. 2, 37). It is not always clear whether these women are only singing or acting and singing. Although some clearly did sing, the two most famous female actress of the time Labība Māllī and her sister Maryam are not mentioned as singing. For examples of their performances see e.g.: *al-Mu'ayyid*, 7 May, 1890 (STMM vol. 1, 128), *al-Nīl*, 6 November, 1892 (STMM vol. 2, 44) for Labība's surname, which is not often mentioned, see *al-Akhhār*, 23 September, 1899 (STMM vol. 3, 237).

<sup>66</sup> Malikat al-Surūr seems often to have sung at the end of shows (*Miṣr* 22 October, 1897, STMM vol. 3, 109) or during acts [*fī khilāl al-fuṣūl*] *al-Muqaṭṭam*, 22 March, 1899 (STMM vol. 3, 218) but is not said to have played a part in the action. However, scripts show definitively that Higazi sung during the action of his plays.

<sup>67</sup> The people chanted "We want Hamlet, one more act" [*'ayzīn Hamlat, lissa faṣl*] demanding some songs. Higazi left the theatre and went straight away to find someone who would write some songs for the play (and eventually found the famous poet Aḥmad Shawqī). Fāḍil, *Salama Higazi* 40-1; Fu'ād Rashīd in *al-Kawākib*, 28 October, 1952.

<sup>68</sup> Frédéric Lagrange, *Musiques D'Égypte* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1996). Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Ṭarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>69</sup> As well as Higazi Abduh al-Hamuli also began by reciting the call to prayer as a youth: Lagrange, *Musiques d'Égypte*, 57.

of a traditional style of performance to the new phenomenon of theatre: from reluctance to stardom.

However, we can also find the impetus for the inclusion of singing away from these traditional styles. Jurji Zaydan in a 1910 edition of his magazine *al-Hilāl* discusses the popularity of singing in theatre:

People thought [in the early days of theatre] (and this is still widespread now) that acting was not really acting unless it was interspersed with singing parts. This opinion came about because the founder of acting, God rest his soul, [Marun al-Naqqash] when he wanted to translate [*naql* literally: carry across] this art into Arabic, he preferred musical plays, or what the Europeans call opera, wanting people to turn up even if it was for the sake of hearing singing... So the first acting that Arabic speakers knew was plays mixed with singing and they continued in this fashion even for plays which were not operas before.<sup>69</sup>

Zaydan's genealogy for song does not come from Sufi performance but European opera. The play *Al-Sirr al-Maknūn*, shows the inter-mingling of these two possible histories of singing in Egyptian theatre. It starred Salama Higazi, the singer with a religious training, but it also came from an Italian opera. The performance demonstrates the difficulty of ascribing a source, either European or Egyptian, to elements of the genre when such a dynamic process is at work.

One by-product of the popularity of the songs is that, although the text of *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* does not survive, Salama Higazi's songs do. The emotional verses in some of the songs, lamenting the vagaries of fate, might be part of the reason that the attribution of this play as a version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* are still made today. For instance:

1

حكمت يا دهر في ذلي وفي نكدي      ألسـت تبغي بهذا الحكم من أمد

تركنتني في الأسى والوجد يحدق بي      حتى اضعت اضطباري غير متأمد

My fate, you have ruled for my humiliation and hardship

Did you not want this ruling to extend for a long time?

You have left me in despair deep emotion surrounds me

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<sup>69</sup> *al-Hilāl*, May 1910, 471.

So that I have lost my patience; it no longer remains.

2

أيا دهر مالي في السرور نصيب      وليس لدائي في الانام طبيب  
ظننت بأن الدهر لي اليوم قد صفا      وعسى بما يهوى الفؤاد يطيب

Oh fate, I have no share in happiness

And, among people, there is no doctor who can cure me

I thought [wrongly] that my fate had become pure

And that, it might look pleasantly upon what the heart desires.<sup>70</sup>

Although they are all consistent with the genre of ghazal, the laments of fate, invocation of humiliation and desperate situation of the singer can all bring to mind Oedipus after he discovers his true origins. With these songs surviving and the similarities already outlined between *Demofonte* and the Oedipus myth, we can see why people have reached to attribute this play as a version of *Oedipus Tyrannos*. So, obliquely and in a strange guise, Oedipus' came into Egyptian drama indirectly.

#### Voltaire's *Oedipe Roi* or *al-Sirr al-Hā'il*

Oedipus' next appearance on the Egyptian stage in Arabic was Najib al-Haddad's translation of Voltaire's *Oedipe Roi, al-Sirr al-Hā'il* [*The Terrible Secret*]. This was the first translation into Arabic of any play that directly adapted Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Its subsequent performances offer a good example of how audiences' appetites for singing as well as the decisions of the troupe shaped the 'language' of performance on the stage.

In Jurji Gharzuzi's edition of the play he states: "This is the first play [*riwāyah*] that the deceased [al-Haddad] translated in his youth." Since al-Haddad died in 1899 and was active though the late 1880s and 1890s we can suppose that he translated this play around the late 1880s. Gharzuzi's note also adds another piece of information that makes an interesting addition to our model of the development of Egyptian theatre. He says that the text is written by al-Haddad "excluding the music and songs which he did not write but that the leaders of the troupes who performed it set." When it was performed in 1900 after his death we see, as should not now surprise us, that the troupe added several songs to the play when putting it on

<sup>70</sup> These two songs and others from the play are available in Faṭḥallah, *Salāma Ḥijāzī*, 130–32.

the stage. Unlike *Demofonte*, the troupe were now adding songs to a play that did not have them before.<sup>71</sup>

The printed text of the songs often has a note about the rhythm and melody they should be performed to. It turns out that the majority of the tunes were not written by the troupe themselves but came from an Arabic version of the French opera *L'Africaine*, translated by Yusuf Habish, compiler of a famous Arabic-French dictionary, and Dawud Barakat. It was first performed in 1897, starring the ubiquitous Salama Higazi.<sup>72</sup> Tunes such as 'The Maids Approached' [*aqbalna al-jawārī*], 'The Lord of Hearts' [*mālik al-albāb*] and 'Reject the Infidel' [*anbidhū al-kāfir*] are repurposed to fit into the new play.<sup>73</sup> This repurposing is sometimes creative and interesting and can take up the themes of the originals in the new versions. For instance, the tune of 'Reject the Infidel' is used in a song condemning the killer of Laius and asking for revenge. In both cases, the man who steps outside the rules of society is subjected to condemnation and reproach.<sup>74</sup>

In the complicated amalgam of influences lying behind singing, here the Arabic tradition is prominent, despite its origins in European opera. The songs would have been, of course, in an Arabic musical scale, as the songs in *L'Africaine* were. Also, despite the supposed pagan context of Oedipus, the songs are clearly written in an Arabic-Islamic idiom, situating them in the traditions of religious music. For instance, Islamic epithets of God *al-Rahmān* [the Merciful] and *al-Qahhār* [the Conquering] are invoked by the people. In the style of contemporary worshipers, the people address the gods as they would the monotheistic God: *anta mawlānā, laṭīf bil- 'abād* [you are our lord, kind to worshippers].<sup>75</sup>

The function of the songs in the narrative seems to be, primarily, to highlight and to emphasise important parts of the drama. Just as in prose work of the time when passages of verse came at times of high emotion, the troupe used songs to the same effect. It is an example of theatre practitioners reaching for existing performance traditions to express the necessary tension in the text with the tools at hand

<sup>71</sup> al-Ḥaddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 95.

<sup>72</sup> *al-Ahālī*, 15 March, 1897, *al-Surūr*, 16 March, 1897 (STMM vol. 3, 76). The songs that appear in Faṭḥ Allāh, *Salāma Hijāzī*, 121–24.

<sup>73</sup> al-Ḥaddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 3, 12, 14.

<sup>74</sup> It is possible that *Kāfir* is better translated as “ungrateful one”. However, I maintain infidel because it is necessary to render the idea that he has transgressed norms and religion by his behaviour. This is reiterated in the next line of the song which says that he has “overstepped religion” (*ta'addā al-dīn*).

<sup>75</sup> al-Ḥaddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 3, 19.



So, with the city in a state of heightened pain and emotion, this versions begins with a song by the priest, who has arrived from the temple to pray for the people of Thebes:

اغفر للذنوب يا اله الناس  
فرج الكروب وانف عن البأس. أمان  
نيسط الايادي بالدعا المجاب  
الرحمن هادي من له اناب. أمان

Forgive us out sins, God of the people.

Drive out our worries and banish our ills. Safety.

We spread out our hands praying for response.

The merciful [God] is a guide for those who seek refuge in him. Safety.<sup>76</sup>

From then on, the songs are overwhelmingly in the first act of five in the play and focus on the suffering of the people of Thebes, the plague and the need for revenge on the killer of Laius. Then the others come after two very important moments in the play, namely the discovery that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius and the death of Jocasta. The songs seem intended to appear especially at times of high emotion and drama to affect the audience and guide their reactions.

There is one song, however, which merits further analysis. The troupe give the play a new close by adding a short song. In the original the play ends with Jocasta dying on stage, having stabbed herself. The Arabic version ends with:

ماتت الملكة اصبح الحزن عام  
فعليها الرضا وعليها السلام

The Queen has died and all are in grief

May she have satisfaction and may she have peace<sup>77</sup>

This extra epigram added by the singers to the end of the play in simple and direct Arabic reinforces the focus on Jocasta that ends the play. Voltaire's version of the play is one that

<sup>76</sup> al-Ḥaddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> al-Ḥaddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 95.

puts much more focus on Jocasta and her romantic entanglements. He, in fact, introduces another love interest for Jocasta called Philoctète. This new lament for Jocasta just before the curtain goes down puts even more prominence of Jocasta's role in the play and makes her a more important character in this first Egyptian version of Oedipus.

Najib al-Haddad's *The Terrible Secret* did not become a popular fixture in any troupe, as *al-Sirr al-Maknūn* did, and it only seems to have been performed twice at the turn-of-the-century (once in 1900 and again in 1905). However, both plays show how the process of translating for performance, as with translating literature, shapes and forms the target language. As both performances and linguistic translations they show the many levels at work. Translation is not simply a transfer between the two languages but an act that re-forms and shapes the target language in unexpected and diverse ways.

### Translation as Performance

So far, the question has been whether performance can be thought of as a kind of translation. However, the similarities between translation and performance do not only work in one direction. Translation could equally well be thought of as a kind of performance, showing us another way to go beyond the old questions of fidelity.

Bertolt Brecht and his attempts with Charles Laughton to translate his *Galileo* illustrate the performative nature of translation:

[H]e [Laughton] spoke no German whatever and we had to decide the gest of each piece of dialogue by my acting it all in bad English or even in German and his then acting it back in proper English in a variety of ways until I could say: that's it. The result he would write down sentence by sentence in longhand. Some sentences, indeed many, he carried around for days, changing them continually.<sup>78</sup>

Brecht continues by theorising the process:

The awkward circumstance that one translator knew no German and the other scarcely any English compelled us, as can be seen, from the outset to use acting as our means of translation. We were forced to do what better equipped translators should do too: to translate gests. For language is theatrical in so far as it primarily expresses the mutual attitude of the speakers.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Building up a Part: Laughton's Galileo', in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 163–68. Quote from 165

<sup>79</sup> Brecht 'Building up a Part', 165–66.

Brecht, in these difficult circumstances, built up a model of translation which he argues “better equipped translators” would do well to follow; that is, a model of translation as performance.<sup>80</sup>

This model can also inform turn-of-the-century Arabic translation. At the beginning of the chapter I referred to Tanyus ‘Abduh and his supposedly inaccurate methods of translation: “he carried with him sheets of paper in one pocket and a French novel in the other. He would then read a few lines, put the novel back in his pocket, and begin to scratch in a fine script whatever he could remember of the few lines he had read.”<sup>81</sup> This vignette shows something else too. During his translations, Tanyus Abduh became as much an actor as a writer; his translations were acts of performance. It is surely significant, therefore, that Karam Mulhim Karam’s version of the anecdote stressed Abduh’s passion for acting and that Abduh’s first steps in the cultural world were as an actor. The famous actor Naguib al-Rihani [1889-1949] also benefited from links between acting and translating, combining working as an actor and a translator when he joined al-Shaykh Ahmed al-Shami’s troupe.<sup>82</sup>

Across Arabic theatre and literature of the time the boundary between translator and actor was very fluid. This fluidity is something that contemporary Egyptian critics have developed. Mohamed Samir al-Khatib, for instance, argues that “a dramaturge is one of the most important forms of a translator as s/he reconstructs the text according to his/her culture and its cultural codes.” He goes on to say that “[t]ranslation falls into an intermingling semiotic conflict: it is a lingual, artistic/theatrical, and cultural sign.”<sup>83</sup>

If we turn back to Sulayman al-Bustani’s thoughts on translation from this perspective, we can find some more relevant points. In choosing to introduce long epic poems into Arabic literature, he is choosing a genre which, in its Homeric origins at least, is performative. He also seems at times, to construct his own translation as a type of performance. It took him all over the world and the location of his work is an important part of his views about the product.

For seven years, I moved around a lot between the East and the West. A day in Syria, a year in Europe and America, then back to Istanbul. The *Iliad* was my companion whenever I managed to steal some time away. Whenever my hand stopped work it returned to [the *Iliad*]. Often weeks or months would pass and she was hidden away then I would rouse her from sleep and return to work on

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<sup>80</sup> See also: Patrick Primavesi, ‘The Performance of Translation: Benjamin and Brecht on the Loss of Small Details’, *The Drama Review* 43, no. 4 (1999): 53–59.

<sup>81</sup> Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 107.

<sup>82</sup> Karam, *Mukhtārāt min Karam Mulhim Karam*, 64–65. Najīb al-Rīḥānī, *Mudhākīrāt Najīb al-Rīḥānī [Memoirs of Naguib al-Rihani]* (Cairo: Kalimāt, 2011), 25.

<sup>83</sup> Mohamed Samir al-Khatib (Trans. Mona Khattab), ‘Translation and Dramaturgy in Egyptian Performances of *King Lear*’ in Aaltonen and Ibrahim, *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre*.

her. Often this happened on the peaks of mountains, on the decks of ships and on railway cars so she is, in this sense, a daughter of the four corners of the Earth.<sup>84</sup>

Like Tanyus Abduh, this story that Bustani tells of his own journey with the *Iliad* constructs the process of translation as something more than just the appearance of one text from another. Bustani constructs the translation of a dynamic relationship between the translator, the text and the world around him. Brecht might say that he turned translation into a *gestus*. At the time, most of the most prolific and important translators (Tanyus Abduh, Najib al-Haddad, Farah Antun and more) were translating for the theatre, as well as for the book. It is, therefore, no coincidence that there might be this overlapping of performance and translation.

### Conclusion

To study the history of Oedipus in the Egyptian theatre it has been necessary to examine how the Egyptian theatre tradition began to incorporate non-Egyptian plays. Building on Arabic theories of translation from the turn-of-the-century, I have proposed a theatrical model of translation that is informed by the development of Arabic drama in Egypt. This chapter has argued that although the Egyptian theatre tradition is built on texts from European theatre the process of their translation onto the stage is a far from simple importation of a European performance language into Egypt.

The translation movement at the time was involved in reshaping, developing and exploring the limits of the Arabic language, often in surprising ways resuscitating forgotten parts of the language and literature. Drama was also working in the same way so the act of *translating* play texts to the stage invigorated traditional genres as it made them a part of a theatrical mould. The most prominent amongst these was singing. This has been much of the focus of this chapter as it will be in the next chapter also.

The boundaries between translation and performance, particularly at this time in Egypt, were more fluid than they are often portrayed and comparisons between the two can be productive in both directions. Just as constructing performance as a type of translation (in certain ways) can be profitable, so can constructing translation as a type of performance. The accounts of translation from the time show that this was an element to the way that many did

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<sup>84</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 71–72.

actually translate in Egypt. Seeing translation as a *gestus* can help to move towards a new and useful way of looking at the phenomenon at the time.

Against the background of this chapter, this thesis will go on to analyse how, through the twentieth century, attempts to translate and adapt *Oedipus Tyrannos* for Egyptian theatre have revealed several possible ways that ‘theatre’ as a concept in Egypt could develop. It is *as* people attempt to incorporate this ancient Greek play into Egyptian theatre that they can shape the genre. The act of *translating* the play forces theatre practitioners to negotiate between different performance traditions that are available, and beyond that to uncover different histories that unite Greece and Egypt. They can use this to think about what is *Egyptian* about Egyptian theatre and what that could mean in twentieth century Egypt.

## **Chapter Two: George Abyad's Oedipus**

The first chapter presented the place of singing within the early development of Arabic theatre as relatively untroubled. Its background was complex, part-Arabic and part-European, but its right to be part of the theatre was not contested. During the first decade of the twentieth century critics began to push back more and more against the dominance of music and singing in the Egyptian theatrical tradition. In 1912, a translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* itself was first performed in Arabic in Egypt. This production was an important moment in the continuing negotiations between those who supported and those who opposed the place of singing in drama.

The man behind it, George Abyad, was born in Beirut in 1880 but moved to Alexandria in his early childhood and became part of a large community of Syrians and Lebanese living in Egypt. In the early years of the twentieth century he was spotted performing by the Khedive 'Abbas al-Hilmi II. The Khedive was, it is said, so impressed that in 1904 he sent this part-time actor, employed in the Egyptian railways, to Paris to perfect his art. Having studied with the Comédie Française great, Silvain, he returned to Egypt in 1910 with a French troupe performing plays in French. Even then he said that his real ambition was to perform plays in Arabic for the Arabic speaking people of Egypt. In 1912, he realised this aim, staging Arabic translations of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Othello* and *Louis XI*.<sup>1</sup>

Abyad's, *Oedipus the King* [*Ūdīb Malikan*], gives us a case-study of a performance that we can explore. This chapter uses the play to complicate the debates of the time between 'serious', 'high-quality' acting in Arabic and the 'low' vaudeville or musical theatre that was so popular at the turn-of-the-century. On closer scrutiny, this play shows that these debates were more complicated than they might first appear.

This production of *Oedipus the King* can also help develop the more nuanced model of cultural exchange that the first chapter discussed. This play helps us look at the formation of the theatre beyond simple dichotomies of 'Europe' and 'The East'. The play *Oedipus Tyrannos* was hugely contested in Europe as it was in Egypt. Around the time of Abyad's performance, Oedipus was also the centre of theatrical debates in England, France and

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<sup>1</sup> Abyad's life story is told in Su'ād Abyād, *Jūrj Abyād: Ayyām lan Yusdal 'alayhā al-Sitār* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1970). It is full of rich detail but does not have references and a number of the details are open to questioning. For his entry into theatre and meeting the Khedive see: 55–74. For his time in France and then his triumphant return to Egypt and performance of Oedipus in Arabic see: 75–127. On his dream to perform in Arabic: *Le Matin*, 16 March, 1910, 4.

Germany in ways that can be read directly alongside its Egypt performance (though each had its own unique characteristics). We can see these different versions of the play as part of a global moment of theatrical modernism, occurring simultaneously across several countries and not as a belated phenomenon in Egypt.

Finally, as the first performance of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Arabic, this is an important moment for the history of the play in Egypt. So, this chapter closes by examining what effect performance had on interpretations of the play and what kind of Oedipus was produced with the first version of the ancient Greek original. Although the text is close to Sophocles' version, its translation on to the Egyptian stage had some important effects on its content. Most importantly, this chapter argues that we can see, in this performance, the beginnings of a theme that would become central to later iterations of Oedipus - a reading of the play that focused on the role a leader should have in his state and the structures of his power.

### Musical Theatre in the Early Twentieth Century

We have already seen that the musical elements of plays were extremely popular with audiences and their inclusion must have been a major consideration when it came to creating commercially viable plays. However, increasingly, singing in the theatre came to acquire many detractors. Even as Sulayman al-Haddad's troupe<sup>2</sup> were busy adding songs to Voltaire's *Oedipe Roi*, other writers were railing against the amount of singing on the Egyptian stage.

A few reactions against singing had come almost as soon as it had been incorporated into the theatre but the beginning of the twentieth century saw a sharp increase in these attacks. Critics called for moves towards what they called a more "serious" [*jadd*], "refined" [*rāqī*] or "artistic" [*fannī*] type of theatre, denouncing the preponderance of song. The first decade of the 1900s saw growing interrogation of the state of Egyptian theatre and its direction. Arguments increasingly began to focus on the dramatic form and what Egyptian theatre ought, practically speaking, to be. These arguments contrasted with earlier writings in newspapers about the genre, which had primarily argued for the positive societal benefits of theatre, called on the government for support and tried to persuade Egyptians that they should be making drama for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sulaymān al-Ḥaddād was Naguib's father and a famous actor and producer. It was he who first acted Naguib's text of *Oedipus*.

<sup>3</sup> There was some discussion in the turn-of-the-century on the state of Egyptian theatre, for example: *al-Rāwī* in 1888 (1 March (STMM vol. 1, 96), 1 April (STMM vol. 1, 98-9), 1 June (STMM vol.1,

Salama Higazi, as we saw in the last chapter, was the most popular singer of his time and he, personally, was the focus of many of the attacks. In 1900, Farah Antun, in his journal *al-Jāmi‘a*, mentioned the criticism of Salama Higazi. “We have heard many people say that Sheikh Salama Higazi has killed the art of theatre in Egypt dead. They say this because the audience do not go to the theatre to hear the plays but to hear his songs”.<sup>4</sup> Rather than being part of theatre, music distracted from the real business of acting.

People became more vocal in their attacks as the first decade of the twentieth century went on and Salama Higazi was, again, the target. One short article in *al-Akhbār* starts by criticising the fact that Arabic-authored plays are not as good as European ones. The author soon goes on to say that even the translations of European plays are ruined when performed in Arabic, laying the blame on Higazi’s singing:

Yes, some writers have translated bits of Shakespeare, Corneille and Hugo but these translations are only written for Salama Higazi to distort them with his bad acting or sing some poems in them and nothing more.<sup>5</sup>

In 1910, *al-Hilāl* published a long article on the state of Arabic acting.<sup>6</sup> In it Jurji Zaydan criticised the fact that people thought that singing had to be a part of acting, blaming Marun al-Naqqash for having turned first to the genre of opera when he introduced theatre to the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> He then raised the case of Iskandar Farah whose troupe split with Salama Higazi in 1905 after an argument between Higazi and Iskandar Farah’s brother Caesar [Qaysar].<sup>8</sup> The two went their separate ways and each formed their own rival acting troupe. Zaydan lamented that “Farah Efendi wanted to return acting to its basis [*yu‘addil al-tamthīl ilā ‘aṣl waḍ‘ihi*] so he made the [word missing] of his new troupe without singing [*bilā ghinā’*].

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102–03), 1 July (STMM vol. 1, 105–06) as well as : *al-Ṣādiq*, 24 December, 1887 (STMM vol. 1, 87–88), *al-Qāhira*, 19 November 1888 (STMM vol. 1, 109). However, firstly, the vast majority of available articles are short notices about plays followed by, if anything, unreserved praise for the production. In the early twentieth century (and very late nineteenth century) it longer articles of criticism become more common. Secondly, in such articles as we have articles from the 1880s and early 1890s, the primary focus is usually the lack of government support for Egyptian troupes or the societal benefits of theatre, rather than discussion of broader questions of what the performances should look like. The articles in *al-Rāwī* are rare exceptions.

<sup>4</sup> *al-Jāmi‘a*, 1 March, 1900, 571.

<sup>5</sup> *al-Akhbār*, 22 January, 1909 (STMM vol. 5, 203).

<sup>6</sup> *al-Hilāl*, ‘al-Tamthīl al-‘Arabī’ [Arabic Acting], May 1910, 464–72.

<sup>7</sup> pg. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Najm, *The Play in Modern Arabic Literature*, 129.



His reception amongst the literati [*al-udabā'*] was good but the audience did not find in it what they found in other plays so Salama Higazi's troupe won that competition."<sup>9</sup>

Criticism of singing also spread beyond the theatrical critics alone. Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's famous *Hadīth 'Isā ibn Hishām*, [*What Isa Ibn Hisham Told Us*] is centred on a Pasha from the reign of Muhammad Ali, who was the first Khedive of Egypt and a man often credited with being "the father of modern Egypt". The aristocratic Pasha is resurrected in turn-of-the-century Cairo, which has changed a lot in less than a century. Guided by Isa ibn Hisham, the Pasha samples the modern life of the city, expounding his almost entirely unflattering opinions on the new state of Egypt. Near the end of his tour Isa takes the Pasha to a theatre.<sup>10</sup> In the description of the scene the reader is told that "[The actors] started performing in an unbearable fashion something best described as between chanting and singing [*mā bayn al-mulaḥḥinīn wa-l-murattilīn*], whatever it was human nature revolted against it... They sounded like camel drivers in the waterless desert or people attending a funeral".<sup>11</sup> The narrator's scorn for the musical element of the theatre is undisguised. In particular, his imagery stresses that this kind of performance is out of place in the refined, urban setting of a theatre. The reader has been transported to a boorish country location, not the home of high culture that such a place should be.

### Politics of Criticism

Looking further into these debates, it becomes clear that a series of judgements and assumptions lie behind these critiques that go beyond a purely aesthetic aversion to singing. The critical discussions about singing in the theatre reveal a lot about the cultural standpoints of their authors. They point us towards one of the key questions of theatrical criticism of the era: what was theatre for? Ask any critic in turn-of-the-century Egypt and it is likely you would have got roughly the same answer: Theatre is for refining society and perfecting its morals.

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<sup>9</sup> *al- Hilāl*, May 1910, 471–72. The "blank" is where the full text has not printed fully, leaving only an –iyyāt at the end of a word. Its ascence is important it seems strange to say that there was no singing in Farah's troupe, since Aḥmad al-Shāmī was the singer in that troupe (see e.g. *Miṣr* 17 May, 1906 [STMM vol. 5, 41]) and frequently performed the Opera *L'Africaine* in Arabic which, as we have seen, was "full of songs" (*al-Muqaṭṭam* 19 May, 1906 [STMM vol. 5, 42]). Perhaps he meant, as Najm, *The Play in Modern Arabic Literature*, 130 has stated that the troupe did not rely on the singing alone [*lā taqūm 'alā 'unṣur al-ghinā' fa-ḥasbu*].

<sup>10</sup> A Parallel Arabic-English version is available: Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī, *Hadīth 'Isā ibn Hishām: aw Fatra min al-Zaman* [*What Isa ibn Hisham Told Us: Or A Period of Time*], trans. Roger Allen, 2 vols (New York: New York University Press, 2015) vol. 2, 161–81.

<sup>11</sup> al-Muwayliḥī, *What Isa ibn Hisham Told Us*, 164–65. Trans. Roger Allen.

This was a view that went back to the earliest days of Arabic theatre criticism and formed a major part of the argument that the government should fund Arabic troupes.<sup>12</sup>

When the Pasha is taken to the theatre in *Ḥadīth 'Isā ibn Hishām*, his guide explains the moral benefits that theatre can have for a society:

This place isn't either a dance hall [*marqas*] or a nightclub [*mal'ab*]. This is a theatre [*tiyātrū*], something that Western peoples acknowledge as having educational and corrective qualities. It encourages virtues, exposes evil traits, and portrays the deeds of former generations so that people can be educated and learn lessons from them.<sup>13</sup>

The other side of this capacity of the theatre to improve morals, though, is its ability to degrade them. The Pasha responds to Isa's claims by pointing out how degenerate the place he saw was. "What I've seen here is just a repeat of what I've seen in the dance hall – drinking wine, flirting with women, portraying amorous situations in a highly suggestive manner..."<sup>14</sup>

Farah Antun also wrote about the theatre's abilities to corrupt the masses:

When we went to the performances of some plays and saw the licentiousness [*khalā'a*] and profanity [*mujūn*] in them which ought to make the listener recoil, we did nothing but hope that no young man or woman would hear this rubbish [*safāsif*]. Unfortunately, young men and young women, as well as older men and women, pay great attention to this rubbish in plays and they laugh and cackle, not thinking that they are being corrupted by the poison of vice in the souls without their knowledge. It surprises us that the government in Egypt does not think of putting a stop to the prevailing moral chaos [*al-fawḍā al-adabiyya al-sā'ida*] on Egyptian stages. For among the plays that are put on these stages, especially the comic ones, there are things that no ear should hear and that no eye should see.<sup>15</sup>

The communal element of theatre, particularly, is a dangerous moral concern, where the gathering of many people can lead to mass corruption instead of mass improvement.

Critics who believed in the improving power of the theatre reacted especially strongly against singing. Partly, this was because its goal seems to be pure delight and entertainment not for moral improvement. Even the word used for singing (*tarab*) emphasises its emotional effect over its intellectual content. The danger of appealing to unthinking emotion is an anti-theatrical trope which goes back as far as Plato's *Republic*. For people who needed to

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 63–67.

<sup>13</sup> al-Muwayliḥī, *What Isa ibn Hisham Told Us*, 166–67. Trans. Roger Allen.

<sup>14</sup> al-Muwayliḥī, *What Isa ibn Hisham Told Us*, 168–69. Trans. Roger Allen.

<sup>15</sup> *al-Jāmi'a*, March 1, 1900, 568–9

emphasise the morally improving nature of the theatre, song created audience reactions and emotions which were dangerously hard to predict or control.

Beyond this, singing also risked compromising the refinement of theatres *as spaces*. The narrator in *Hadith Isa ibn Hisham* commented that the singing seemed to turn the theatre into a low-class rustic setting. More worryingly, singing also associated theatres with their immoral counterpart, the music hall, where moral refinement was far from the agenda. In an article in 1910 in *al-Mahrūsa*, the writer, ‘Fakhr al-Din’, complained that around the Ezbekiyya area of Cairo

theatres [*malāʾib*] for singing [*ghināʾ*] and cafes for balladry [*tarab*], where (female) singers [*mughanniyāt*] sing and delight the ears with their sentimental tunes and where women give performances, which they would not performed were it not for people’s love of watching things that can only be seen in secret or under the cover of dark night. Passers-by can see all of these things but they do not see any theatres for acting [*tamthīl*] in its [correct] meaning or in name.<sup>16</sup>

Not only did singing not benefit the morals of society, but it was tied to the worst fleshpots and dens of iniquity the city had to offer. Theatres, if they admitted singing, admitted the corruptions of these places.

Of course, certain political ideas animate this elite condemnation of mass culture. The idea that theatres did not exist to entertain but to perfect the morals of society, for example, has undertones of a paternalistics, class-based discourse on the improvement of the common man by his enlightened superior. From another angle, it also allowed a self-styled elite to separate itself from the tastes of their social inferiors. Throughout the period, there prevailed an often-patronising disdain for ‘popular’ or ‘traditional’ art forms, from folk tales to epic ballad.<sup>17</sup> In *Ordinary Egyptians*, Ziad Fahmy productively looks at Bourdieu’s work on “taste” and its class dynamics as an entry point to the theatrical debates of the time, saying that this was part of a way people stratified class distinctions. Furthermore, the condemnation of the moral turpitude of certain types of performance “was not merely a matter of aesthetics, cultural

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<sup>16</sup> *al-Mahrūsa*, 26 January, 1910 (STMM vol. 5, 226–27).

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12. “Intellectuals understood popular, oral narrativity as the antithesis of modern narrative, repeatedly attacking the former as both a cause and a symptom of the corruption of the masses.”

taste, and a reinforcement of class distinction but a reflection of the conservative elite's fear of these new forms of media".<sup>18</sup>

The rise of this discourse of refined [*rāqī*] theatre can also be traced alongside the rise of an educated, nationalist middle class [*Efendiyya*] in the early twentieth century. The new bourgeoisie's aim of modernising Egypt included a high, refined literary culture, often accused of a paternalistic imposition of their own ideals on the rest of society. Lucie Ryzova describes this refinement [*taraqqī*] as "framed as a large community-oriented mission" and says that it was part of the main mission of the new *Efendi* class.<sup>19</sup> Along with novels and printed cultural journals, the theatre, with its didactic possibilities, was one of their great concerns. An example of their promotion of an acceptable, *Efendi*-type of theatre came in 1908 when a "the elite of the young literati of Cairo" set up a group "for the refinement of Arabic acting" [*taraqqī al-tamthīl al-'arabī*].<sup>20</sup> A critic called "Fu'ād" of *al-Akhbār* newspaper went to the opening night of their new project and poked fun at the proceedings in an article:

One of the literati got up and gave a speech ... and the speech was no shorter than two acts of the play, God give him strength, ... and among what he said – God gave us a blessing with abundance of his words – he claimed that the name of the group alone was enough to bring us to its aid. For it was a group for refinement [*taraqqī*] – and we are in great need of refinement – and then there is the word "Arabic" in it and, my my [*yā salām*], there's nothing better than this word.<sup>21</sup>

His disdain is not hidden, but in this article we see a reflection of how people were defining theatre's cultural mission (as well their concomitant pomposity).

Singing, for its opponents, represented a kind of mistranslation of the theatre. It was the very purpose of the theatre as a social good that was being distorted. It was in this atmosphere of reaction against singing in the theatre and promotion of 'refined' theatre that George Abyad produced his version of Sophocles' play.

We should be careful to note that Salama Higazi's performances were not of the same order as a simple nightclub singer. His music had more claim to artistry. However, it is clear that for many critics it still had no place in the theatre. My question is: how can we use this

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<sup>18</sup>Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). See 128-131 for a statement of the relationship between Bourdieu and the Egyptian theatre of the early twentieth century. Quote from 129.

<sup>19</sup> Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), passim. Quote from 7.

<sup>20</sup> *al-Mu'ayyid*, July 11, 1908. (STMM vol. 5, 174–75).

<sup>21</sup> *al-Akhbār*, July 14 1908 (STMM vol. 5, 175–76).

production of *Oedipus Tyrannos* to tease out some of the concerns that lay behind the distinction between ‘proper theatre’ and its musical counterpart?

### Sophocles’/ Jules Lacroix’s *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Arabic

On the 21st March 1912 George Abyad’s troupe of Actors started the first night in a series of theatrical performances with an Arabic version of *Oedipus Tyrannos*. According to the playwright and critic Muhammad Taymur [1892-1921], the mood in Cairo was one of anticipation. After the posters advertising the performances went up, “The capital was all hustle and bustle. The people in the cafes talked about nothing but Abyad and you could hear the student say to his friend in front of school ‘Are you buying tickets for the first or second showing [*al-ishtirāk al-awwal aw al-thānī*]?’”<sup>22</sup> As the correspondent for *al-Ahrām* newspaper wrote the day after the performance of *Oedipus the King*: “Truly, I have never seen a night at the Opera [the name of Cairo’s main theatre] like last night. There was large crowd of our elite, upper classes, intellectuals and writers; the ones who could get tickets. There was also a large crowd of people looking for tickets but who couldn’t find a place.” Among the throngs of spectators, though presumably not queuing for a ticket, were such dignitaries as Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi II [1874-1944], ‘Abd Allah Najal the Amir of Mecca, Ahmed Hishmat Pasha the Minister of Education, Isma‘il Sirri Pasha the Minister of Works and War and Husayn Rushdi Pasha the Foreign Minister.<sup>23</sup>

For many years after this legendary performance, people continued to watch to the play. Taha Hussein claimed that “I never tasted the beauty of true acting except when I witnessed [*shāhadtū*] George Abyad acting the story of *Oedipus the King* and his other plays”.<sup>24</sup> As a child, the playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim used to memorise Abyad’s speeches as Oedipus and recite them to his classmates.<sup>25</sup> Naguib al-Rihani, who went on to become a famous actor and troupe leader, used to travel to Cairo in the holidays he had from his work in a sugar factory just to see the plays. In his memoirs, he tells how he would irritate his co-worker – a dentist by the name of Doctor Gouda – by reciting extended passages from, amongst other plays, *Oedipus the King*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Muḥammad Taymūr, *Mu‘allafāt Muḥammad Taymūr: Hayātunā al-Tamthīliyya. al-Juz’ al-Thānī* [*The Works of Muhammad Taymour: Our Theatrical Life*] (Cairo: al-I‘timād, 1922), 131–32.

<sup>23</sup> *al-Jarīda*, 23 March, 1912, 2, *al-Ahrām*, 22 March 1912, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Su‘ād Abyad from 1965 reproduced as the epigraph of Su‘ād Abyad *George Abyad*.

<sup>25</sup> pg. 121.

<sup>26</sup> al-Rihānī, *Memoirs*, 29.

Abyad's 1912 season, which included his *Oedipus the King*, was seen by many as a step in a new direction, away from the theatre dominated by singing alone and towards a different kind of theatre – progress towards a more artistic kind of theatre. Muhammad Taymur, for instance, placed Abyad at the start of his fourth stage in Arabic theatre that “truly expanded the art of acting”. Taymur's view was that Egyptian theatre had evolved in several distinct stages. The first was initiated by the Syrian troupes who first brought theatre to Egypt, at this time the mostly audience came to this new dramatic form. The second stage was the first part of Salama Higazi's career, when the translations of plays were good but the performance relied too much on singing. In this stage people came just to watch the singing. The next stage came after Higazi and Iskandar Farah had split into two troupes. Now, people came for the singing and to appreciate other aspects of the art such as good set design. The fourth stage, which these performances by Abyad initiated, was the stage of “true art” [*al-fann al-ṣaḥīḥ*]; it never truly succeeded in Taymur's eyes, due to the ignorance of the audiences.<sup>27</sup>

Despite Taymur's reservations about the audience reaction, this event was still hugely important. “For years, the Egyptian people have been demanding an improvement in Egyptian acting so that it competes with European acting”, and this was a step toward realising this improvement, said an *al-Ahrām* review of the performance. The review in *al-Jarīda* said that “general opinion agreed on the point that, on this night, Arabic drama had taken a wide step forwards”. *Al-Hilāl* made sure the Khedive received some praise for the funding he gave Abyad to study in Paris saying that “history will remember the favour of his highness, as he was the first to raise up the art of Arabic acting on intellectual principles [*qawā'id 'ilmiyya*]”.<sup>28</sup>

This play became the centre of numerous battles being fought in the Egyptian theatre: primarily, the contested place of singing in drama and, by extension, the perceived need for a ‘refined’ theatre. Few critics at the time gave full definitions of what this ‘refined’ theatre was and what judgements lay behind their critical championing of it. By attempting to pick apart the distinctions the critics were making, I hope to show the significance of this performance in both Egyptian theatrical history and the development of an Egyptian Oedipus.

An easy, but flawed, way to conceive of this debate would be as a battle between so-called ‘European’ and so-called ‘Indigenous’ performance traditions. By this logic, Abyad's

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<sup>27</sup> “*Irtaqā fann al-tamthīl irtiqā'an*” Taymūr, *Our Theatrical Life*, 22–26. (page number begin for a second time after the introduction; referenced from *al-Sufūr* (1918–19). This rough timeline (largely based on Taymur, we can assume) can also be found in Nevill Barbour, ‘The Arabic Theatre in Egypt’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 8, no. 1 (1935): 173–87. Taymur used the terminology *fannī* [artistic] often to describe his ideal type of theatre.

<sup>28</sup> *al-Ahrām*, 21 March, 1912; *al-Jarīda*, 23 March, 1912; *al-Hilāl*, April 1912, 437.

1912 production, performed shortly after his return from Paris, would represent a European model of acting and Higazi (with his singing) would be the cheerleader of the traditional. This dichotomy is something that the first chapter has already tried to complicate. Of course, we cannot entirely remove the spectre of Europe from any of these debates. European styles of acting were clearly very influential on the theatre practitioners of the time, both as a result of trips to Europe and of seeing the touring European theatre troupes who came to Egypt. However, to construct this as a simple dichotomy between ‘European’ and ‘Indigenous’ does not do justice to the complexities of either European or Egyptian theatre at the time nor does it map on to how the practitioners themselves perceived their art.

Even trying to isolate what precisely defines the ‘European’ and what defines the ‘Indigenous’ makes the picture murky. The previous chapter argued that the prominence of singing was a result of the process of translating these texts to the stage and the repurposing of local performance traditions into a new genre of ‘theatre’. But Singing in Egyptian theatre could also be constructed just as much as an influence of European opera as of traditional Arabic singing. Higazi himself was not always put in the box of a traditional singer. His popular nickname, “The Caruso of the East”, constructed him just as much in a ‘European’ mould as anything else.<sup>29</sup>

The more we look, also, the more difficult it becomes to isolate and define European theatre. It is too diverse to be able to say that there was one type of European theatre (high tragedy, for example) and other types should not be considered ‘European’ theatre. Comedy, vaudeville and farce have just as much a claim to be ‘European’ as tragedy. When Sulayman al-Haddād and ‘Aziz ‘Id started their Comedy Troupe in 1907, it was treated just as much as a new phenomenon as tragic theatre was. However, it could not be called “refined” or “artistic” in the same way.<sup>30</sup> In fact, ‘Id later went on to form the Franco-Arab Revue, which, by its name alone, could hardly be called non-European. In the 1930s Nevill Barbour was using similar language to attack it as had been used to attack Higazi and other singers: “the success of the Franco-Arab Revue is sometimes held to have debased the public taste and injured the position of legitimate drama.”<sup>31</sup> And if ‘European’ revue theatre can be attacked as much as

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<sup>29</sup> For the title Caruso of the East see e.g. Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey*, 61. It was a common nickname for Egyptian singers, also applied to Yusuf al-Manyalawi: Lagrange, *Musiques d’Égypte*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> *al-Mu’ayyid*, 7 September, 1907; 10 September, 1907 (STMM vol. 5, 126; 127).

<sup>31</sup> Barbour, ‘The Arabic Theatre in Egypt’, 182.

‘indigenous’ singers, we must ask what work these catchwords were doing in the debates of the time.<sup>32</sup>

Abyad’s *Oedipus the King* points towards another way to theorise the material. We should not ignore European theatrical trends but nor should we view Egyptian theatre of the early twentieth century as forced either to imitate or reject ‘Europe’. Rather, let us consider how Egyptian theatre was making an active engagement in the theatrical debates happening across Europe.

Classical Greek drama was central to many of the formal debates of the early twentieth century in places other than Egypt. If we look at the famous production of Strauss’ *Elektra* in London in 1910 we find several similarities to the discourse in Egypt. The performance is discussed at length by Simon Goldhill, who collects the views of reviewers, most of whom were markedly hostile. “*The Daily Express* summed it up with the memorable headline, ‘DECADENT, NOT CLASSIC’”.<sup>33</sup> Other reviews particularly attacked Strauss’ music and the dancing. *The Spectator* accused *Elektra*’s “nameless dance” of being “a long sequence of those reptilian contortions and convulsions extremely popular at the modern music-halls under the title of Apache dance, Vampire dance, or some such lurid designation”.<sup>34</sup> Here the accusations thrown by the reviewer were noticeably similar to those being made in Egypt: what is on this respectable stage should be in some vulgar music-hall.

Given his training in Paris, Abyad would have been well aware of the formal controversies of the time. He unsuccessfully auditioned for a place at the Conservatoire four times from 1904-1907 but his failure there did not stop his theatrical education. According to his biography, he would go out to the Bois de Boulogne with others who had failed to join the Conservatoire and practice his craft. Eventually, he seems to have used a mix of charm,

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<sup>32</sup> Muṣṭafā, *Antecedents of Modern Arabic Drama* mocks the critics who constantly compare Arabic theatre to European, saying that “analogies between European and Arabic theatres become not only irrelevant but misleading” (277-8). Muṣṭafā argues that Arabic theatre in Egypt was not influenced by European theatre at all but by earlier Arabic antecedents. Although Arabic theatre is influenced by earlier performance traditions, it is surely wrong to suggest that there was no European influence on Arabic drama. The reason critics risk getting caught in a dilemma is because of an assumption that European drama is a single monolithic entity.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Goldhill, ‘Blood from the Shadows: Strauss’ Disgusting, Degenerate “Elektra”’, in *Who Needs Greek: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 108–77. Quote from 138.

<sup>34</sup> *The Spectator*, 12 March, 1910, 20.



enthusiasm and flattery to get the famous actor Eugene Silvain to agree to train him without a fee.<sup>35</sup>

Silvain, who was described as having a very classical approach to acting, focused heavily on the declamation, diction and the poetry of the text in a way that would have been antagonistic to the ‘decadent’ style of Strauss’ *Elektra*. One contemporary account said:

Mr Silvain’s class is very literary, literary because the professor loves literature and he strives to make his students share this taste. He loves poetry; he loves it for itself; he likes it out loud [*en auditif*]. One would think to hear him that he is listening to himself and that he would never forgive it if he allowed one syllable to be lost – even a silent one – or if he did not give, in the harmony of voice, the exact and subtle impression of the cadence of the poetry. He has remained classical: he will remain classical.<sup>36</sup>

He was also an ardent supporter of Athenian tragedy, translating with Ernest Jaubert Euripides’ *Andromache* and Aeschylus’ *Persians* for performance at the Comédie Française.<sup>37</sup>

Silvain was an influential teacher. Abyad appears to have followed his mentor’s taste for poetry “en auditif” and his focus on the importance of the voice. When he was advertising for a troupe to perform in 1912, Abyad added in his advertisement that “Filip Effendi Makhluḥ oversees teaching the actors and training them in proper declamation [*ṣiḥḥat al-ilqā*] of the Arabic language”.<sup>38</sup>

When it came to performing his *Oedipus the King*, Abyad was a poetic, declamatory actor in the style of Silvain and the Comédie Française. Muhammad Taymur even went as far as to say that “many people say that [Abyad] is a copy of Silvain made smaller for the spectators and that he moves in the same way as Silvain in everything, even in the roles which are not suited to Silvain’s nature.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Abyad, *Jūrj Abyad* for biographical details. Bois de Boulogne: 78-81. Training with Silvain: 91-100. Records of Abyad’s unsuccessful auditions at the Conservatoire (under the name Abiad or Abbiad), can be found in the French National Archives AJ/37/205/2 and AJ/37/336.4. From the photos in the biography it appears that he spent time at Edouard Chavagnat’s *Ecole Classique de Musique et de Declamation*.

<sup>36</sup> *La Nouvelle Revue*, February 1902, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Silvain, *Tel Était Silvain*. (Paris: Les Éditions Denoël et Steele, 1934), 200–209.

<sup>38</sup> *al-Akḥbār* 25 August, 1911 (STMM vol. 6, 29). See also Sameh Hanna, ‘Decommercialising Shakespeare: Mutran’s Translation of “Othello”’, *Critical Survey* 19, no. 3 (2007): 27–54. esp. 34–35.

<sup>39</sup> Taymūr, *Our Theatrical Life*, 141–42.

It was not only Silvain who influenced Abyad in France. During his studies, Abyad used to go to shows at the Comédie and the other theatres of Paris.<sup>40</sup> One performance he must have seen was Jean Mounet-Sully's production of Jules Lacroix' *Oedipe Roi*, which played every year that he was in Paris and 11 times in 1908 alone.<sup>41</sup> Certainly, when Abyad took Oedipus to Egypt, it was this version that inspired him. It is said that, during Abyad's Paris rehearsals in 1910 for his French language tour of Egypt, Mounet-Sully sat incognito in the stalls. After the rehearsal finished he revealed himself to Abyad and declared: "after having seen you acting this role I am relaxed about its fate on the Egyptian stage and I congratulate you."<sup>42</sup> Photos of Abyad's performance show that the stage design – particularly the costumes – was almost identical to Mounet-Sully's performance.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, the text that Farah Antun used for his translation is very likely to have been the same text, translated by Jules Lacroix, that Mounet-Sully used. Muhammad Yusuf Najm [1925-2009], in an article on Abyad's troupe, states that the text was translated from Lacroix but does not cite direct evidence for the claim.<sup>44</sup> When Abyad acted the play in French in the 1918-19 season in Egypt we can see from the posters reproduced in his biography that the French text used was Lacroix's. All of this strongly suggests that Lacroix was used for Farah Antun's translation. However, we can make a still more convincing case by turning to the Arabic itself.

I have not been able to find either a manuscript or a text of the Arabic translation but there is an incomplete recording from Egyptian radio in 1948 featuring George Abyad in what the announcer calls his "immortal role" of Oedipus.<sup>45</sup> Since this recording does not use Taha Hussein's translation of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which

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<sup>40</sup> Abyad, *Jūrj Abyad*, 83, 100.

<sup>41</sup> For more details of the plays performed at the Comédie Française see Alexandre Joannides' documentations under the title *Comédie Française* followed by a year e.g. Joannides, *Comédie Française 1908* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1909).

<sup>42</sup> *al-Ahrām*, March 1, 1949.

<sup>43</sup> Cairo's National Centre for Theatre museum in Zamalek has pictures of the performance but photography is forbidden.

<sup>44</sup> Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, 'Masrah al-Shaykh Salāma Ḥijāzī fī Ṭawr al-Istiqlāl', *Majallat al-Ibḥāth [American University of Beirut]* 26 (1973-1977): 57–139. His assertion that Lacroix is the source comes at 81.

<sup>45</sup> 'Üdīb', Egyptian Television and Radio Union, accessed 28 December, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1P8wkiJFzE> (missing the final scene). It stars George Abyad, Dawlat Abyad, Hussayn Riyād amongst others and is produced by Muḥammad Tawfīq. The recording is not dated but based on Abyad, *Jūrj Abyad*, 323-4 and the dates of the careers of those involved we can reasonably surmise that it was recorded in 1948.

was the only Arabic translation available at the time, one must assume that the actors were using a version of the text that Abyad first used in 1912, even if it had been altered over the course of 30 years. It is on the basis of this recording, recently uploaded to the internet, that my case is formed.<sup>46</sup>

A comparison of the Arabic to the French and Greek can establish that Antun used Lacroix; one passage near the beginning of the play gives particularly clear evidence for this. As Creon returns from the Oracle, Oedipus asks him what he has learned. The Greek runs as follows:

### **Κρέων**

λέγοιμι' ἄν οἱ ἤκουσα τοῦ θεοῦ πάρα.

ἄνωγεν ἡμᾶς Φοῖβος ἐμφανῶς ἄναξ

μίασμα χώρας, ὡς τεθραμμένον χθονὶ

ἐν τῇδ', ἐλαύνειν μηδ' ἀνήκεστον τρέφειν.

### **Οἰδίπους**

ποιῶ καθαρμῶ; τίς ὁ τρόπος τῆς ξυμφορᾶς;

### **Κρέων**

ἀνδρηλατοῦντας ἢ φόνω φόνον πάλιν

λύοντας, ὡς τόδ' αἶμα χειμάζον πόλιν.

### **Οἰδίπους**

ποιού γὰρ ἀνδρὸς τήνδε μηνύει τύχην;<sup>47</sup>

Lacroix's translation runs:

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<sup>46</sup> Frédéric Lagrange very kindly provided me with a copy of George Abyad's 1931 recordings of scenes from the play made for Odeon. However, they come from the end of the play which this 1948 recording is missing so it is impossible to compare the two versions. The 1948 version is close to a complete recording of the play whereas the 1931 78rpm record only has a few of Abyad's speeches on and was likely slightly altered for the record.

<sup>47</sup> *Oedipus Tyrannos* (Henceforth OT), 95–102. Literal translation: '**Creon**: I would say the things that I heard from the God. Lord Apollo clearly ordered that we drive out the pollution from the land, since it has been raised on this earth, and that we not continue to raise it, fatal to us [as it is]. **Oedipus**: With what kind of purification? What is the manner of this disaster? **Creon**: We should banish him from his home or pay back murder with murder, since the blood is tossing the city like a storm. **Oedipus**: Who is the man whose fate [the god] reveals?'

**Créon**

Les paroles du Dieu vont sortir de ma bouche.

Voici ce qu'Apollon souverain nous prescrit:

“Purgez le sol thébain du monstre qu'il nourrit!

“L'incurable fléau demande qu'on l'expie”

**Oedipe**

Quelle expiation?

**Créon**

“Il faut chaser l'impie,

“Et que le meurtre soit par le meurtre lavé.

“C'est du sang qui déborde, et rougit le pavé”

**Oedipe**

De quel meurtre le Dieu parle-t-il? De quel homme?<sup>48</sup>

Lacroix's translation matches the original quite closely but some of the changes he makes are important clues to the source of the Arabic text.

The first thing to focus on is a two-line exchange. In Lacroix's version, at the end of Creon's first speech, he says “L'incurable fléau demande qu'on l'expie” (“The incurable plague which is demanding that we expiate it”) and then, in his reply, Oedipus picks up the vocabulary, asking “Quelle expiation?” (“with what expiation?”). The repetition of the term is “expie/ expiation” by Creon and then Oedipus adds an interplay between the words of the two characters which does not exist in the Greek.

A second change is that, in Lacroix, Creon uses the term “impie” (infidel) to describe the man who needs to be driven out. In the Greek, this sentiment is all put into the word ἀνδρηλατοῦντας, which means “[we should] chase [him] out of house and home”. Lacroix, therefore, is both adding a direct reference to who should be chased out and assigning them the designation ‘impie’.

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<sup>48</sup> Jules Lacroix, *Oedipe Roi* (Paris: Calman Lévy, 1882), 5. First published 1858.

A third change to note is that Lacroix introduces the vocabulary of washing (“le meurtre soit par le meurtre lavé”, “death should be washed by death”) to Creon’s second speech. This imagery is not present in the Greek. It is possible he has a variant text which has λουοντας (washing/ bathing) in the place of λυοντας (ransoming/ paying back). I have not found this variant in any Greek texts or French translations available. It is much more likely that Lacroix is mistranslating the word or just using different imagery, making this a unique and indicative point of difference between Lacroix and Sophocles.<sup>49</sup>

Now, consider the Arabic:

كريون: أسمعوا الوحي الذي هبط علينا من الإله أبولون وأمرنا بانفاذه

قال

طهروا أرض طيبة من اثر الوحش الذي يعيش فيها

لا يزول الوباء من المملكة إلا بفدية نفتديها

اوديب: أي فدية؟

كريون: يجب طرد الكافر من أرض بعث فيها

يجب نفي القتل بالقتل وغسل الدم بالدم وتخصيب الأرض بدماء ترونها

اوديب: أي دم يعني الإله ومن يقصد؟<sup>50</sup>

There are clearly things that the Arabic is doing independently of both the Greek and the French. For instance, Creon begins with an invocation to “listen”, which might be implicit

<sup>49</sup> I have consulted all of the standard texts of *Oedipus Tyrannos* (OCT, Budé, Teubner, Loeb) as well translations and less common nineteenth century French editions that Lacroix might have consulted (e.g. Sophocles, *Oedipe Roi* (Paris: Jules Delalaine et Fils, 1848) translated by R Ricard; Sophocles, *Oedipe Roi* (Paris: Maire-Nyon, 1841) translated by P. A. Clipet) and this appears to be unique to Lacroix. If he did have a Greek text that carried this variant, it is extremely rare.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Ūḍīb’, 8:35 ff. In English: **Creon**: Listen to the prophecy which has come down to us from the god Apollo and what he commanded us to do. He said: purify the land of Thebes from a trace of the monster which lives in it. The plague will not leave this kingdom except by us paying a recompense (/ransom). **Oedipus**: What recompense? **Creon** It is necessary to drive the infidel from the land he is causing havoc in. It is necessary to cancel out killing with killing, to wash blood with blood and to fertilise the land with blood for irrigation. **Oedipus** What blood does the god mean and who does he pursue?

in the Greek and French but is only made explicit in the Arabic. However, using the three points I raised above, we can confidently say that the French was the model underneath it.

Like the French, the Arabic makes Creon talk the language of recompense (*on l'expie/ bi-fidya naftadīha*) and in his response Oedipus repeats it (*expiation/ fidya*). Also, in the Arabic, Creon's second speech uses the word *kāfir* (infidel), which seems to be a direct translation Lacroix's '*impie*', a word with no parallel in the Greek. Farah Antun's text also uses the image of washing (*ghasl*), which is an image that seems only to appear in the Lacroix text of the play.<sup>51</sup>

To be able to show that Abyad's *Oedipus The King* used this text is important because it traces another line of inspiration to Mounet-Sully's landmark French version of *Oedipus Tyrannos*. It is through this performance that the production of Oedipus can be most easily tied into the performance debates of the early twentieth century. By using the Lacroix/Mounet-Sully version Abyad was consciously involved in a clash of performance modes which was playing out in many different places. So, the production was not an intervention in a debate between European and Egyptian styles of performance; It can more productively be thought of as a case-study in a larger clash between performance styles.

Indeed, Fiona Macintosh's study of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in production, gives a central role to Mounet-Sully's version of the play. His performance and style were very formal and rigidly constructed. Mounet-Sully's Oedipus relied on what Macintosh calls a "sculptural" style of acting, which constructed the actor as a pristine object of beauty but not one, necessarily, full of life. She demonstrates the huge importance of this production of Lacroix's text, written in neo-classical rhymed alexandrines, as well as the influence that this iconic leading performance of Oedipus had across Europe.

It was in reaction to this (or at least in dialogue with it), argues Macintosh, that Reinhardt's revolutionary 1910 *Oedipus Rex* appeared on stage, premiering on the 25<sup>th</sup> September in Munich. While Mounet-Sully represented a purely Apolline (in the Nietzschean sense) and sculptural view of tragedy "with its individuation, restraint and formal beauty", Reinhardt's new production had space for "life-enhancing/ death-dealing Dionysiac music, with its collective, intoxicating, rapturous and murky depths." This new version of the play also came to London in 1912, claiming to be the first production since the seventeenth century. So, at exactly the same time that Abyad's *Oedipus the King* was making waves in Egyptian

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<sup>51</sup> This is only one example of a trend that is sustained by a longer comparison of the texts.

theatre, other productions of the tragedy were asking how classical drama should be performed and debating similar issues across Europe.<sup>52</sup>

For Egyptians, the cultural traffic of the theatre was not seen as one-way either. Many of the most important French and Italian actors came to Egypt, including Sarah Bernhardt, Ermete Novelli and Mounet-Sully himself, and were welcomed by Egyptian theatre practitioners for the chance their presence gave to discuss both Egyptian and European theatre. Muhammad Fadil's biography of Salama Higazi describes the scene when Sarah Bernhardt saw one of his performances. She was so moved that she stood up from her box halfway through and began to shout praise to the performers: "The genius of the East is more zealous and productive than the genius of Western countries". Fāḍil also reported that Mounet-Sully told several people, including George Abyad, that he learnt how to play Hamlet from Salama Higazi.<sup>53</sup>

We should not ignore issues of class and "taste", which shaped the Egyptian debates as they did elsewhere. What this *Oedipus* shows us, though, is that the formal debates of the time cannot be reduced simply to a clash between proponents of European acting and proponents of a traditional Arabic style of acting. The reason why Abyad's *Oedipus the King* was welcomed by critics was not because it was European but because it was promoting a certain kind of pure, artistic acting that felt just as under threat in Europe as it did in Egypt.

A recent study of Egyptian surrealists makes a similar point:

[The] Art and Liberty [group] had considered themselves as members of an international crowd of artists who were immersed in shared artistic and intellectual pursuits, social and political implications notwithstanding, and who were simultaneously engaged, from Cairo, with the modernist challenges that were being discussed in a number of locations such as New York, Mexico City and Paris, just to name a few... Instead of picturing them as victims to a marginalizing Western-centrism, it is more adequate to highlight their role as active catalysts who contributed to the evolution and widening up of the formalistic qualities of surrealism at the time.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Fiona Macintosh, *Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). On Mounet-Sully particularly see 81-95. On Reinhardt and its relationship to the Mounet-Sully see 102-112. On the British performance of *Oedipus* in 1912 see 112-23. On Reinhardt's *Oedipus* see also: Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 158-62 and Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 521 ff. esp. 538-ff. 542. For more on the distinction between the Apolline and the Dionysiac see: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Fāḍil, *Salāma Hijāzī*, 50-51. These stories are very hard to verify but at least show that Egyptian theatre practitioners at the time saw themselves in an equal dialogue with French theatre practitioners.

<sup>54</sup> Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism, Rupture and the Art and Liberty Group* (London: I B Tauris, 2016), 32.

This view of the equality between Egyptian and European artistic movements still demands more comparative study and attention to nuances. One cannot ignore the condescension in Western circles for Arabic artistic production. However, the first appearance of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Egypt can help to explain how Egyptian theatre practitioners conceived of what they were doing in the early twentieth century. It can also help to explain and elucidate the close relationships between the performances of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in many different contexts and countries.

### Translating *Oedipus Tyrannos* to the Stage

Critical discourse around the play usefully frames Abyad's performance but needs to be paired with details of the performance itself. As I argued in the previous chapter, it is *in* the translation of these plays to the stage that the Egyptian theatre tradition is shaped and moulded, not independently of it. Debates in the press are a part of the Egyptian theatre but performances have more concerns than that alone, the paying audience being a major one. This section will, therefore, look at how the production was enacted on stage and how this influenced the development of Egyptian theatre and Oedipus' place within it.

Despite Abyad's obvious debts to Mounet-Sully, his production was not just a carbon copy of the French version. Critics such as Muhammad Taymur and Jurji Zaydan longed for pure, artistic theatre uncorrupted by singing and they wanted Abyad's troupe to reflect their 'refined' ideals. However, the performance they got was much more hybrid than they might have hoped for.

Although Higazi was not a low class vaudeville singer, theatre critics of the time were still attempting to cast song, and by extension Higazi's performance style, as the aesthetic oil to Abyad's water. Singing could not be part of truly artistic theatre. It might, therefore, be surprising to find out that Abyad commissioned Higazi to write the songs for the play, although he did not perform them in the 1912 run.<sup>55</sup> It has often been assumed that there was no singing in this play but contemporary reviews show that this assumption is false and allow us to show that the singing element that had been a central, but controversial, part of most Arabic drama was also incorporated into this play.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Fāḍil, *Salāma Hijāzī*, 312.

<sup>56</sup> Hanna 'Decommercialising Shakespeare' n. 30, said that there was no singing in the first season of Abyad's performances. However, a review by Muḥammad Tawḥīd in *al-Ahrām* 27 February, 1912, 2 praises "The actors, the *singers* [*mughannīn*], the dancers and the musicians" and he later says that



In years following 1912, as the play became a staple of Abyad's troupe and the songs become well known, Higazi began to sing them himself. By 1914, Higazi was giving solo performances of the songs from *Oedipus* in his own shows.<sup>57</sup> The 1914 merging of Abyad and Higazi's troupes into one is a good demonstration of the practical lack of strict distinction between Abyad's highly-trained style of acting and Higazi's singing.<sup>58</sup> Across its two year life, this double troupe performed *Oedipus* a number of times and although Higazi never acted in the play leaving Abyad in the dramatic centre as *Oedipus*, as by this time he was too ill to act at all, he did sing songs.<sup>59</sup>

Muhammad Taymur's high hopes for a new stage in Egyptian drama that would be ushered in by Abyad's performances never quite materialised. This merging of the two troupes must have been final proof for Taymur of the audience's unreadiness for high art. Nonetheless, if we take a less rigid view of what Egyptian drama should be, we can see this performance did some extremely important things.

The fact that the singing in this play came in gaps between the action was an important development. Previously, actors were accustomed to break into song mid-dialogue or mid-speech in a highly-stylised way. Perhaps, the way that the singing was used was as much of an irritation to the critics as its existence in itself. Notably, when Jurji Zaydan in *al-Hilāl* reviewed Abyad's run of performances he does not praise the lack of singing *per se* but "the lack of singing interfering in the acting [*al-'adūl 'an idkhāl al-ghinā' fī-l-tamthīl*]"'.<sup>60</sup> Again, if we see the debates about singing as formal, rather than as a battle between East and West, this specially designated time for singing goes a long way to meeting the demands of the critics.

Here the fact that we are dealing with the specific play *Oedipus Tyrannos* becomes highly relevant. Athenian drama was written to have a natural break in the action where the chorus sang, usually without any actors on the stage area. Abyad (and Higazi) did not translate

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"The acting opened with a sorrowful tune [*naghma mūsīqiyya shajīyya*] which was fit in with the plot [*lām 'at al-mawḍū*] thanks to the skill of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, the group's musician [*mūsīqār al-jamā'a*]"'. Tawḥīd also talks about the odd contradiction between the happy smiles of the female dancers and the sorrow of *Oedipus*.

<sup>57</sup> Fathallah, *Salāma Hijāzī*, 31–32. The songs are printed in the same volume 118–20.

<sup>58</sup> Najm, 'Masraḥ al-shaykh Salāma Hijāzī', 72–76. Their unification was spearheaded by 'Abd al-Rāziq al-Ināyat who owned both troupes: Fādil, *Salāma Hijāzī*, 56–57.

<sup>59</sup> For performances of the play see Najm, 'Masraḥ al-Shaykh Salāma Hijāzī' 128–35 when Najm says *Oedipus* was performed: 12/12/1914, 10/04/1915, 05/05/1915, 24/12/1915, 11/02/1916, 10/03/1916.

<sup>60</sup> *al-Hilāl*, April 1912, 437. It is perhaps this that M. M. Badawi is referring to in *Early Arabic Drama* when he says Abyad "produced plays without the intrusion of singing", 65.

the choral odes of Oedipus, but instead they placed Higazi's songs into the same spaces in the narrative which were ready-made to incorporate them.<sup>61</sup> The ability to please two different segments of the audience by having singing but not letting it get in the way of the action should not be understated, especially in a time when troupes could appear and disappear very quickly and the ability to draw an audience – and with it money – was so important.

Oedipus was not the only play that Abyad performed at the time but it does appear to have been the flagship. It was the first play performed in the 1912 run of *Oedipus The King*, *Othello* and *Louis XI*. It was also chosen as the play to be performed in a private show for the literary elite in February before the first public performance.<sup>62</sup> It was only after seeing a rehearsal of Oedipus and enjoying it that Khalil Muṭran was persuaded to translate *Othello* for the run in March.<sup>63</sup>

It was a version of Oedipus that allowed singing and also incorporated the critics' desire for serious acting. The choral element, which could be seen as a survival from the earliest Greek version of the text, made the translation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* to the Egyptian stage particularly apt at this time when the role of singing in the theatre was being debated so widely.

### Creating an Egyptian Oedipus

Despite the furore around Abyad's first performances in Arabic, we should be careful not to overstate the influence they had on subsequent practitioners. In many critics' estimations, he did not really fulfill the potential shown in those three plays in his later career. He never seemed to be able to keep one troupe going and even reverted to performing his plays in French again for a while after the end of the First World War.<sup>64</sup> Also, although the performance might have offered a possible model for the theatre that incorporated both singing and "serious" acting, these two conflicting strands of performance were not reconciled in the long term. In fact, they seem to have drifted further apart and the inter-war years in Cairo are

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<sup>61</sup> Perhaps Muḥammad Tawḥīd in *al-Ahrām*, 27 March, 1912 is referring to the chorus when he says that "George Abyad decided, with his cleverness and skill, to add to the play some beautiful dancing girls, touching tunes and moving string music, that was in keeping with the plot and *was in harmony with the customs and habits of Greece* [*i'talafa ma' 'ādāt al-yūnān wa-taqāḍīhim*]"'. Though, we should note that the introduction of female as well as male members of the chorus is more likely to have come from Lacroix. Al-Hifnī, *al-Shaykh Salama Higazi*, 190 notes that when songs were added to *Louis XI* and *Othello* by Higazi they also came "in the appropriate place in the action".

<sup>62</sup> *al-Waṭan*, 03 February, 1912 (STMM vol. 6, 43).

<sup>63</sup> Khalil Muṭrān, *Aḥl* (Cairo: 1912), 1.

<sup>64</sup> Posters from his French plays are reproduced in Abyad, *Jūrj Abyad*.

dominated by even more extreme versions of the debate. It is in the late 1910s, 1920s and early 1930s the singers like Higazi who strive to include song in tragedy and high class theatre are disappearing; it is the time of crude humour and raucous singing, like that of Naguib al-Rihani. In contrast, the neo-classical (in an Arabic, rather than French, sense) drama of Ahmed Shawqi and the melodrama of Yusuf Wahbi develop a more “artistic” style of drama, devoid of singing.<sup>65</sup>

The influence of Abyad’s play on subsequent versions of the story of Oedipus in Egypt should not, however, be underestimated. The 1912 production was performed for over 35 years and, as I noted, was seen by many of the most important Egyptian theatre practitioners of the twentieth century. The final performance of *Oedipus the King* took place in 1949 and, by this time, Abyad’s signature piece had set up many of the themes that would become central to later versions of the play.

It is useful, once more, to turn to Mounet-Sully’s version of the play as a way of understanding the thematic importance of Abyad’s. One of the reasons that Fiona Macintosh argues that Lacroix/ Mounet-Sully’s performance of *Oedipe Roi* was so significant is because the play focused principally the character of Oedipus as an individual. Nineteenth century readings of tragedy were filtered through Aristotle and thus “exaggerated the role of the single tragic figure” and Lacroix’s text in Mounet-Sully’s production granted “the chorus generally no more than a marginal role, [so] the single central figure [i.e. Oedipus] gained even greater prominence”. Rather than a play about the gods, Mounet-Sully himself said of his interpretation, “I’ve only seen a man, an unfortunate king”. The character of Oedipus is humanised and turned into an “everyman” figure, instead of a plaything of fate and the gods. It is this move, she argues, that provided the roots of Freud’s psychoanalysis of the Oedipus story, allowing Freud to read much more into the personality and psychology of the central character *as a man*.<sup>66</sup>

This interpretation of Mounet-Sully can help our reading of Abyad’s version which was so indebted to his French predecessor. At the least it can help to argue against a contemporary reviewer who said that the play was all about fate and only fate: “The moral of the play [*maghzā al-riwāya*] is that a person should not be jealous of someone with comfort

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<sup>65</sup> On al-Rihani see e.g. Taymūr, *Our Theatrical Life*, 115–23, Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 158–62, or his own memoirs al-Rihānī, *Memoirs*. For Wahbī see e.g. his memoirs: Yūsuf Wahbī, *‘Ishtu Alf ‘Ām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1973).

<sup>66</sup> Macintosh, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, 86–91. Mounet-Sully quote from L. Vernay ‘Chez Mounet-Sully À propos d’Oedipe Roi’, *Revue d’Art Dramatique* 11 (July-September 1888), 13–14.

or rank [*dhā al-ni‘ma aw jāh*] for the hand of fate has concealed calamities and misfortunes for him that make him a lesson to those of sound mind.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, though Abyad’s version put a great deal of emphasis on Oedipus as the central character, it was not just a carbon copy of the French version. The way that *Oedipus Tyrannos* was performed in Egypt, in contrast to Paris, allows us to draw a very different message from the play, one that has drastically different implications. In particular, the addition of Salama Higazi’s songs to the play had a significant effect on how the audience read the play. Once again, although the text of the original play does not survive, some of the songs are available in at least two volumes. It is through a closer analysis of the singing that we can show the thematic difference between Abyad’s and Mounet-Sully’s productions.<sup>68</sup>

The first song comes at the beginning of the play and is a song of lamentation for the state of Thebes and an appeal to Oedipus for help:

1

يا عين جودى بالدماء حزنا على هذى الربوع  
هيهات أن يطفى البكا نارا زكت بين الضلوع

2

دهم الوباء ربوعنا فغدت تتوح وتندب  
فلندعون جميعنا أوديب فهو لنا الأب  
أوديب يا غوث البلاد أوديب يا نعم الأريب  
أوديب يا ليث الطراد إنقذ بلادك يا أوديب

1

O eye, pour with blood, grieving for this land

The weeping cannot be extinguished, a fire which has grown between the ribs

<sup>67</sup> *al-Ahrām* 27 March, 1912, 2 also talks about the idea of “a hidden fate whose effect is present throughout the whole play”, despite Oedipus’ attempts to fight it. It seems very likely that this moral was an interpretation of the (textually controversial among classical scholars) epilogue to the play. OT 1524–30: “Look, inhabitants of our native Thebes. That Oedipus, who knew the famous riddle and was the most powerful of men – which citizen did not look upon him with envy? – has now met a might wave of terrible disaster. So we should consider no mortal man happy, waiting for his final day, until he has crossed the boundary-mark of life, suffering no more pain.”

<sup>68</sup> For texts of the songs see: Fāḍil, *Salāma Hījāzī*, 147–48. Faṭḥallah, *Salāma Hījāzī* 118–20.

The plague has blackened our land, which has begun to weep and wail

Let us all supplicate Oedipus for he is a father to us

Oedipus the country's succour, Oedipus blessedly resourceful

Oedipus, lion of the hunt, save your country Oedipus.

After these songs Oedipus appears on the stage, a monarch addressing his people. He questions them "What faces you my children? Why have you gathered, calling out [for help]?"

The second song, though much shorter, comes in the place of the parodos in Sophocles' text: after Creon has returned from the Delphic oracle with news that in order to rid the city of the plague Laius' murderer must be found.

يا قوم فينا يقيم جاني جنى على طيبة الدمار

فما لنا قط من أمان مادام في هذه الديار

People, amongst us there is a criminal who has inflicted destruction upon Thebes

There is no safety for us as long as we are in these lands

The third song corresponds to the place of the first stasimon in Sophocles after Tiresias has told Oedipus that he is the killer of Laius. Oedipus has grown angry and ordered Tiresias to leave.

إن هذا اليوم إن صح المقال وقعته أصعب من طعن النصال

أصحيح أم كذوب وهما ليته يكذب فيما زعما

لم ترى العراف في هذا الكلام مضمرا حقدا يريد الانتقام

آه إن يصدق فيما قد قاله عن أوديب الشهم فالويل له

This day, if what was said is true, has turned out worse than the stab of a spear.

Did he suppose true or false? If only he lied in what he claimed.

Or did the soothsayer see a concealed hatred that wants revenge?

Ah, if he is truthful in what he has said about bold Oedipus, then woe upon him.

There does not seem to be any song in George Abyad's version which corresponds to Sophocles' second stasimon. There is a song that begins to play in the 1948 radio broadcast of the play and corresponds to the third stasimon, which comes after Jocasta has left the stage one final time having realised that Oedipus is indeed her son, but it cuts out in the first line and is not preserved in collections of Salama Higazi's songs.<sup>69</sup> The last song is preserved in collections of Salama Higazi's songs but, since the recording cuts out early, it is not entirely clear where it comes in the action. Judging from the fact that the songs usually come in the place of the choral odes, it is likely that it was in the place of the choral exodos, after Oedipus comes on stage once he has gouged his eyes out.<sup>70</sup>

ياله يوم له الطفل يشيب      وتكاد الشمس منه تظلم  
لم نكن نحسب هذا يا أوديب      أسفا ضاع العلا والشمم

This is a day when children go grey and the sun almost goes dark

We would not consider this regretful, Oedipus, [since] pride and loftiness are lost

The first thing to notice about these songs is that, in Abyad's version just as in Sophocles', they are put into the mouth of a chorus of Theban citizens. Even when sung by Higazi alone these songs are in the voice of the community of Thebes (or at least part of it).

The song that begins the play focuses heavily on the chorus as a people suffering and dependent on their leader, Oedipus. The first two lines give a strong voice to their grief and suffering. The next four lines move from the suffering of the plague to focus on the people's hopes for a solution: Oedipus, their king. In the last 2 lines of the first song every *bayt* (half-line) except the last begins with Oedipus' name and the last *bayt* ends with it. Since the first word of every *bayt* is sung twice, one is left with a clear message, that the people are calling on Oedipus, their ruler, to help them in times suffering.<sup>71</sup> The chorus pick up language from the text of the play itself. For instance, when they say "We all supplicate Oedipus for he is a

<sup>69</sup> It appears to start "What do you see..." [*mādhā tarā...*] and then fades out.

<sup>70</sup> Though it would also be possible that it comes in the place of the penultimate ode or even at the very end of the play, as in the case of al-Haddad for instance.

<sup>71</sup> At least in the 1948 recording the first word of every *bayt* is repeated.

father to us” they are mirroring the first words of the whole play, when Oedipus addresses his subjects as “children”.<sup>72</sup>

The other songs reinforce similar themes. The second song begins [“*yā qawm*”/ “O people”] as a direct address to the people of the city and continues as a lament for the destruction of the city and the chorus’ own destruction in their homes. Here, the chorus is emphasising its place in the narrative as a doomed populace, in need of succour. The third song takes up the fears of people that their ruler (‘bold Oedipus’) is being deceived or lied about by Tiresias, or the worse fear that he might be speaking the truth. The final song then shows the people’s grief that their king has been disgraced and destroyed.

All these songs unite around the chorus’ relationship to the king or the political events surrounding his rule. In contrast to Macintosh’s model of Lacroix’s *Oedipe Roi* (with a focus on Oedipus as an ‘everyman’, eventually underpinning a Freudian analysis of the play), Abyad’s version and its formal decisions show us a different way to interpret the play. The dominating central character of Oedipus and the added importance given to the singing parts in Egyptian theatre alter the story’s central concerns. The audience was being asked to question what they thought the relationship between the single powerful ruler and his people ought to be and the added prominence of the singing parts is what encourages this.

### A Political Oedipus for Egypt

For classical scholars, the issue of autocracy is a major part of the discussion of tragedy generally – and Oedipus particularly. Perhaps due to its emergence in a “democratic” polity among other non-democratic city-states, Athenian tragedies often show the damage that can be done by autocratic or tyrannical rule. *Antigone* is regularly taken as the paradigmatic example of this but the theme is present in the story of Oedipus too. Richard Seaford, for instance, says that “Oedipus embodies, in the extreme form characteristic of myth, the historical ambivalence of the tyrant as both benefitting and harming the polis” and the same point is addressed by many critics.<sup>73</sup> The issue of power and rule in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, as we shall see, also becomes central to future twentieth century adaptations of the play in Egypt so it is worth pausing to consider it now.

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<sup>72</sup> OT, 1. In fact there is more evidence that Lacroix was the source text in this word for Lacroix makes Oedipus not just call the people of Thebes his children but also him as their father (“Je suis venu moi-même, enfants, moi votre père / Oedipe” Lacroix, *Oedipe Roi*, 1) and the priest responds in similar language (“Relève cette ville en deuil, et considère/ Qu’elle t’a proclamé libérateur et père”, 3).

<sup>73</sup> Richard Seaford, ‘Dionysos, Money, and Drama’, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 11, no. 2 (2003): 1–19.

This political reading often goes hand in hand with a rejection of the Freudian reading of the play. As such, my analysis builds on views expressed in a 1967 essay by Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Oedipus without the Complex”. Here he criticised a Freudian Oedipus that is portrayed as the representative of humanity’s inner desires. He did not consider the main point of the play to be that “Oedipus’ destiny is in a way our own, because we carry within us the same curse that the oracle pronounced against him.”<sup>74</sup>

In a subsequent essay in 1970 he proposed an approach the play that can move beyond Freud. One of the central conflicts of the play was, for him, between Oedipus’ dual status as a divine king who leads the people and a scapegoat (or *pharmakos*), who saves the people in a very different way: by leaving the people. At the end of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Vernant argues that “the divine king, the purified and saviour of his people becomes one with the defiled criminal who must be expelled like a *pharmakos* or scapegoat so the town can regain its purity and be saved.”<sup>75</sup> For both Vernant and Seaford, then, Oedipus is a play that explores one man’s rule over his people not the inner workings of one man’s psyche.

Political readings of Greek tragedy as a genre have become common in much recent scholarship on the subject. Debates continue about how subversive (or not) the messages of Greek tragedy are or how “democratic” tragedy is as an art form. There have also been arguments about how closely we should read Greek tragedy against its contemporary political context. In the 1950s Bernard Knox read the politics of fifth century BC Athens into the *Oedipus Tyrannos* and, thereby, used this specific play to open up a debate on the politics of tragedy.<sup>76</sup>

In Abyad’s Egyptian version and in the subsequent ones I will look at, one political theme recurs frequently, linking the concerns of fifth century Athens to those of twentieth Century Egypt. It is a broader political question about the ability of one man to rule a state or a people. This is a political concern of Greek tragedy, but one that is not only tied to the events

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<sup>74</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Oedipus without the Complex’ in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 85–111. Quote from 86.

<sup>75</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of Oedipus Rex’ in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 113–140. Quote from 125. Miriam Leonard, ‘Tragic Will and the Subject of Politics’, *Phoenix* 59, no. 1/2 (2005): 133–42 reads Vernant against the work of Levi-Strauss and, particularly, Foucault on Oedipus.

<sup>76</sup> Bernard Knox, ‘Why Is Oedipus Called Tyrannos?’, *The Classical Journal* 50, no. 3 (1954): 97–130; Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (London: Yale University Press, 1957). Simon Goldhill, ‘The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 58–76, doi:10.2307/630070. For a response to the “Marxist” ideas that political ideology is built into the fabric of the plays see Jasper Griffin, ‘The Social Function of Attic Tragedy’, *The Classical Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1998): 39–61.



of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. William Allan and Adrian Kelly have recently argued that “The one consistent political line that tragedy does take is... the repeated portrayal of one-man rule (tyranny) as prone to error, paranoia, and disaster.”<sup>77</sup>

The formal decisions made by Abyad’s troupe create a version that begins to foreshadow the interrogation of autocracy which will become a central concern for writers later in the twentieth century. The focus on the central character of Oedipus that comes from Mounet-Sully’s production and is only enhanced by the star-status of George Abyad, is combined with the longstanding prominence of the singing parts in drama, which turns the focus to the chorus, its suffering and its reliance on Oedipus. These two elements together, resulting from the translation of this text to the stage in early twentieth century Egypt, begin to shape the thematic issues which recur throughout the thesis. The performance of this play in Egypt opened up a political interpretation that is diametrically opposed to the Freudian reading, which was so inspired by the Mounet-Sully production.

### Oedipus and Elegy

This interrogation of the relationship between the ruler and the people has important parallels in the politics and literature of early twentieth century Egypt. This was a time when the ability of a single ruler detached from the rest of society, to order it, was being questioned and a new bourgeois nationalism was being formed, which put stress on the powerful members within the middle-class community to steer the nation.

Yaseen Noorani’s *Culture and Hegemony in the Colonial Middle East* has an analysis which can shed light on many of the issues raised in this Oedipus.<sup>78</sup> He traces developments in political thought at the time which form an important background to this play:

The emergence of bourgeois class status inaugurated a new form of publicity based not in the exalted personal status of princely figures, but in the projected capacity of a sector of society defined by a set of attributes to represent the order and agency of society as a whole.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> William Allan and Adrian Kelly, ‘Listening to Many Voices: Athenian Tragedy as Popular Art’, in *The Author’s Voice in Classical and Late Antiquity*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77–122. Quote from 92. The chapter also gives a useful summary of the debates in the area up to now.

<sup>78</sup> Yaseen Noorani, *Culture and Hegemony in the Colonial Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Noorani, *Culture and Hegemony*, 50.

Noorani looks at the rise of elegies for middle class, *efendi* politicians in the early twentieth century. Starting with the famous outpouring of elegiac grief after the death of the Egyptian nationalist Mustafa Kamil in 1908 and tracing the genre through the early twentieth century, Noorani examines the ideology behind these poems and the new constructions of power and order that they bring.

This transference of an external form of order to its immanent appearance in the *efendiya* is seen most dramatically in a form of class publicity particularly prevalent in the early twentieth century—the funeral elegies composed for bourgeois public figures, which were recited in public ceremonies and published in newspapers.<sup>80</sup>

He argues that a move away from panegyrics of living rulers towards elegies of dead ones is a crucial step because elegists began to address the community of mourners rather than individual men. The person elegised “is now incorporated into the community created through his death”.<sup>81</sup> Whereas panegyric stressed that the man who created societal order stood above and apart from the people the genre of elegy placed leaders firmly *within* the community. This is the reason the elegy was so popular among the rising bourgeoisie. They saw themselves – part of the people and not detached royalty – as the being the right people to lead the community and having correct value structure to draw on. New power relationships, therefore, were reflected in the poetry of the time.

The chorus in *Oedipus Tyrannos* presents an interesting case-study to read alongside Noorani’s political view of the elegy. The odes in the play find a different way to subvert the panegyric genre and to question the benefits of a powerful ruler, giving order but set apart from society. Through the course of the play the chorus embodies the poetic shifts that were happening at the time. The singing begins in a panegyric style as they enter at the beginning of the play, giving praise to Oedipus. The first songs are constructed in the very same way that Noorani argued late nineteenth century praise poetry did. They praise the guiding hand of a ruler who orders the world from above (“The country’s succour/ blessedly resourceful/ lion of the hunt”). As they enter, the members of the chorus portray themselves as the children of Oedipus, not as his equals, and beg him to save the country for them.

As the play progresses the emptiness and powerlessness of the chorus’ supplication becomes more obvious. In an irony also noted by Vernant about the Sophoclean original, the man who they have put their trust in to guide their community is shown to be the one who is

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<sup>80</sup> Noorani, *Culture and Hegemony*, 51.

<sup>81</sup> Noorani, *Culture and Hegemony*, 53.

destroying it. Their illusions about his power fall apart and so, through the course of this single play, the songs of the chorus follow the path of Egyptian literature that Noorani sketched: from panegyric to elegy.

In its last song, the chorus sings what is essentially an elegy for Oedipus who, although not dead, is destroyed as a ruler. Their short final song begins in the traditional style we should expect from an Arabic elegy. As Noorani says “generally, the poem begins with a lamentation, which involves, in extreme cases, cosmic and social disruption.” This is what final choral song does, lamenting the people’s position and stressing the grave cosmic disruption in images such as children’s hair turning grey or the sun going dark. In the action of the play, this cosmic disruption is further embodied within Oedipus himself, who has been revealed to have committed one of the most disruptive of acts imaginable.<sup>82</sup>

The chorus in Abyad’s *Oedipus* comes to a bleaker conclusion than Noorani. In his model a new (although admittedly not perfect) bourgeois type of hero is crowned by elegy as panegyric disappears. Abyad’s chorus ends not by praising Oedipus’ qualities, nor even appearing regretful, but with a simple undercutting of both genres. There is no bourgeois hero to rise nor is the power of kingship channelled to the community. The final song ends on an unresolved note: “pride [*shamam*] and loftiness [*ulā*] are lost”. Their faith in a leader is lost and there is nothing to replace it; the whole structure collapses.

The chorus in this play present an implicit criticism of a view of power, embodied in the Khedive, that was being reworked and redeployed by a growing middle class. The setting of the first performance of this play, in the Opera house in front of the Khedive, need not be read as an explicit attack on him but a powerful embodiment of a rapidly changing national politics, one which was seeking answers to the questions of ordering a nation. This political reading, at this stage, is schematic. However, we shall see that these concerns become extremely important in future adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Egypt.

### Conclusion

George Abyad’s 1912 production of the first translation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* into Arabic was a landmark event in the history of Egyptian theatre. It came as debates about the place of singing in Egyptian theatre and its relationship to ‘serious’ acting dominated theatre criticism. The formal concerns about the genre were often a cipher for many other concerns that were animating critics at the time. Issues of power and class, for example, intersected with

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<sup>82</sup> Noorani, *Culture and Hegemony*, 59.

these aesthetic debates in interesting ways. This chapter has argued that the argument should not be simply reduced to a clash between European and Arabic styles of acting. Rather, we should see Egyptian theatre practitioners engaging with a wider age of modernist performance. This clash between forms of acting was playing out in Europe as much as it was in Egypt, albeit in distinct ways.

To see the performance as a negotiation between these performance styles helps us to see its significance more clearly. Abyad's version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* with Salama Higazi's songs suitably placed in the gap left by the removal of Sophocles' choral odes offered a middle ground between the two sides of the singing debate, even if it did not definitively end this issue which remains thorny still.

Considering the play in these terms, and in reference particularly to Mounet-Sully's performance, can tease out some of the meanings and ramifications of this early performance of Oedipus. Due to the nature of production and the simultaneous focus put on the central character of Oedipus and the role of the chorus, the play can show the genealogy of the political readings of Oedipus which come to dominate the mid-twentieth century.

Any discussion of George Abyad's version of Oedipus, based on Farah Antun's translation, is often limited by the fact that the text does not survive, except in fragmentary parts, newly made available on YouTube by the Egyptian state broadcasting company. However, this 1912 production continued to be an important part of the theatre long after its first production. Abyad had brought a version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* to the Egyptian stage which continued to be performed up until 1949, 37 years after its debut. It was also a version that we know was attended by many people who later produced translations or adaptations of Oedipus and whose influence can be seen throughout the twentieth century.

### **Chapter Three : Taha Hussein and the Greeks**

“Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses. Aucun citoyen français ne sait s'il est Burgonde, Alain, Taïfale, Visigoth”

Ernest Renan – Qu'est-ce qu'une Nation? (1882)<sup>1</sup>

“Oedipus: Look, how those two [Greeks] imitate the customs of Egypt in their nature and way of life”

Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*<sup>2</sup>

The engagements with Oedipus that we have seen up to this point were primarily mediated through European versions, whether Metastasio, Voltaire or Lacroix, and not the original Greek text. After the 1920s this changed when the writer and scholar Taha Hussein began to make concerted calls for Egyptians to consider the Greeks part of their own heritage. There had, previously, been sporadic pleas to recognise the close historical ties between Greece and Egypt but these had never grown into a comprehensive movement. Hussein's work and influence meant that subsequent adaptations of the play began to consider its Greek nature in much more detail.

Hussein was also the first person to publish a (direct) translation of Sophocles' play in Arabic. His work with the play brought it further into the Egyptian canon and, by translating it using the original text for the first time, confirmed its status as an ancient Greek play, rather than a 'European' play. He also brought himself into the action. As a blind man the final scenes of the play were particularly painful for him and his identification with Oedipus enacts the aims of his translation project: to allow Oedipus to become Egyptian.

Through his own work and his encouragement of others', Hussein stimulated a growing interest in the Graeco-Roman world. This had important ramifications not just on adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannos* but on how Egyptians viewed the place of ancient Greek literature and history in the twentieth century more broadly. Hussein's central aim was to recognise ancient Greece as part of his own history, to take away the European monopoly as sole descendants of Greek culture and to allow Egyptians access to this period in their past.

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<sup>1</sup> The first sentence of this quotation is cited in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

<sup>2</sup> OC, 337–78.

This move had large and important ramifications on the shape of many of the debates central to productions of *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

The relationship between ancient Greece and Egypt allows us a unique and productive way to deconstruct the issues of cultural exchange that the previous chapters explored. To look at the reception of ancient Greek history and literature in twentieth century Egypt, we must turn to Hussein's numerous writings on the subject. His complex engagement with the legacy of the Greeks in Egypt will help us think through the problematic and often contradictory issues that are in play in colonial and post-colonial Egypt. His discussions highlight both the benefits and problems of any focus on the Greek past in Egypt.

A series of events that began in the winter of 1887 provide a good example of the complexity of the issues that we must cover. They concern a text that is very different from *Oedipus Tyrannos* but whose story, nonetheless, deeply informs our discussion of Sophocles' play. Ernest Wallis Budge, accompanied by the American missionary and collector Reverend Chauncey Murch, was travelling up the Nile to Assiut buying up antiquities on behalf of the British Museum. He went "by slow trains and easy stages so that [he] might be able to go to various villages in Upper Egypt and examine objects which natives wished to sell". In the town of Malawi they spent the night with some of Murch's Coptic friends. The next morning people came to show them antiquities that were for sale, mostly Coptic, of which they bought a few. One man, who had sold Budge some Greek manuscripts earlier in the year, took him to some tombs across the river in the ancient city of Khemenu (Greek: Hermopolis). When he had seen them, Budge became convinced that the tombs in the lower series contained some antiquities. This reasonably ordinary occurrence would soon yield one of the most important finds of the nineteenth Century.<sup>3</sup>

In his own account, Budge claims he encouraged the Copts to seek a permission from the Antiquities Service to excavate but they "absolutely refused to do this, saying they had no faith in the Department."<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 1888, while Budge was in Iraq looking for other treasures and when the heat meant the Antiquities Service was less active, the Egyptians set to

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<sup>3</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *By Nile and Tigris: A Narrative of Journeys in Egypt and Mesopotamia on Behalf of the British Museum Between the Years 1886 and 1913*, vol. 2 (London: J. Murray, 1920), 147–50. P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 1–5 contains details and references to the provenance of the text, including other versions which differ slightly from Budge's. In the text Budge writes that it was December 1888 but this must be a mistake as it is clear from Budge's account that he is travelling between Istanbul and Mosul in Winter 1888 (vol.1, 341–456) and he was in Egypt in December 1887 with Chauncey Murch (vol. 1, 129–50). The account is also internally inconsistent unless we assume that he meant 1887 rather than 1888.

<sup>4</sup> Budge, *By Nile and Tigris*, vol. 2, 149.

work excavating the tombs. In November, Budge received a telegram saying that a number of rolls of papyrus had been discovered. When he returned from a trip to Iraq, passing through Port Said in April 1889, he collected the finds and sent them back to London. The box was opened and examined at the British Museum and was found to contain something extraordinary. It was three rolls of Aristotle's lost *Constitution of the Athenians* (a text whose existence was known but of which there were few surviving traces). Frederic Kenyon, who immediately set about translating it, called this "the most striking event in the history of classical literature for perhaps the last three centuries."<sup>5</sup>

Once the papyri had been read and further examined it turned out there was some text missing. So, on his return to Egypt in October 1890, Budge went to search for the missing fragments. After a tour of several villages in Upper Egypt he found a man in Assiut who was in possession of the fragment he was searching for. Budge says:

I had no difficulty at all in arranging the matter with him, and I took the fragment with me to Luxor. The next question was how to get it to London. It was quite hopeless to expect that the Service of Antiquities would allow it to leave the country, and I did not want to take it with me to Mesopotamia. At length, I bought a set of Signor Beato's wonderful Egyptian photographs, which could be used for exhibition in the Egyptian Galleries of the British Museum, and having cut the papyrus into sections, I placed these at intervals between the photographs, tied them up in some of Madame Beato's gaudy paper wrappers, and sent the parcel to London by registered book-post. Before I left Egypt a telegram told me that the parcel had arrived safely, and that its contents were exactly what had been hoped for.<sup>6</sup>

On January 19th 1891 it was announced in *The Times* that "The British Museum acquired not very long ago a collection of papyrus rolls from a source in Egypt which, for obvious reasons, it is not expedient to specify too particularly."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle and Frederic Kenyon, *Aristotle On the Athenian Constitution* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1891), v. The precise relationship between Aristotle and the work is disputed today, with some thought that it may be a student's notes on Aristotle's lectures not Aristotle himself. For more details see the introduction to Aristotle and P. J Rhodes, *The Athenian Constitution* (New York: Penguin, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Budge, *By Nile and Tigris*, vol. 2, 154.

<sup>7</sup> *The Times*, 19 January, 1891. A large part of the text is also available in *The Classical Review* vol. 5. nos. 1/2 (Feb. 1891), 70–72. A variant story appears in Archibald H. Sayce, *Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 332–34. Dr Alexander of the American College in Assiut helps Sayce save the Papyrus from, inexplicably, being thrown into the Nile by an Egyptian peasant who has it "mushed up" in his pocket. Eric Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), chp. 3. n.12 (page 184) notes that "[t]he purchase price, according to British Museum records was paid to Alexander", backing up Sayce's story. However, in the British Museum archives of the

The discovery of the text was followed by a slew of publications across Europe, including, in the UK, one by Frederic Kenyon in 1891, quickly followed by another by John Sandys in 1893.<sup>8</sup> Studies of European 'Egyptomania' and the traffic of vast numbers of antiquities out of Egypt tend to focus on more impressive physical artefacts but the amount of papyri coming out of Egypt was staggering. Fragments of the same text (*Constitution of the Athenians*) had previously been discovered in the Fayyum and brought to Berlin in 1880.<sup>9</sup> Most famous of these textual finds is the horde at Oxyrhynchus, the first papyri of which were discovered in 1897 with subsequent caches found in the coming years. The collection, which contained important works of both biblical and classical interest, was so vast that much of it still remains unpublished (the latest volume, number 79, was published in 2014 by the Egypt Exploration Society).<sup>10</sup>

On the face of it, this example of Budge's reckless treasure-hunting, disdain for Egyptian antiquities law and - what many would call - exploitation of Egyptian heritage is nothing unique. Nineteenth-century Egyptology is full of similar examples. However, the *nachleben* of these particular rolls of papyrus, in both a European and an Arabic context, is emblematic of a large part of Hussein's engagement with Greece. As we shall see, it becomes a physical embodiment of his

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Egyptian and Assyrian department in the meeting minutes for 9/05/1891 Budge says he wants to "express thanks and in some instances present some of their [BMs] publications to certain officials and other gentlemen who rendered him valuable assistance in his mission." These include "The Revd. Chauncey Murch of Ramleh and Mr J.B. Kneen of Alexandria ([to be presented with] copies of Aristotle on the Constitution of the Athenians)." And "The Revd. J.R. Alexander, of Assiout, who gave Mr Budge certain fragments of papyri forming part of the rolls already in the possession of the trustees (two copies of the Book of the Dead and the text of the Aristotle)." So, although Budge's account does not name Alexander, we do not need to doubt his part in the story. Sayce's precise role remains unclear.

<sup>8</sup> Kenyon *Athenian Constitution*. Aristotle, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, and Georg Kaibel, *Aristotelis Athēnaiōn Politeia* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1891). Aristotle and Friedrich Blass, *Aristotelis Politeia Athēnaiōn* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1892). Aristotle and John Edwin Sandys, *Aristotle's Constitution of Athens: a revised text with an introduction, critical and explanatory notes, testimonia and indices* (London: Macmillan, 1893). Aristotle and Aleksandr Lovjagin, *Aristotelis Athēnaiōn Politeia: Graece et Russice* (St Petersburg: Liberman, 1895).

<sup>9</sup> Sandys *Aristotle's Constitution of Athens*, xxxi–xxxiii. Though the extent of these fragments was nothing like the British Museum's.

<sup>10</sup> For an account of the history of the papyri see P. J. Parsons, *The City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Everyday Life in the Nile Valley* (London: Phoenix, 2007). For an account of the discovery see esp. 12–30. The Oxyrhynchus papyri finds still generate a lot of interest (see: e.g. Edith Hall 'That Dress I Want', *TLS* 27 March, 2015, 14–15). The events surrounding the discovery have also interested theatre practitioners with Tony Harrison writing *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* about the events (first performed 1988). Egyptian scholar and writer Ahmed Etman, inspired by Harrison's work, wrote a play called *The Goats of Oxyrhynchus* [*Ma'iz al-Bahnasā*].



attempts to juggle the possible ‘European-ness’ or ‘Egyptian-ness’ of ancient Greek civilisation, culture and literature.

In 1889, the same year that Budge was trafficking the first consignment of Aristotle’s work out of Egypt, and less than 100 miles up the river from where the papyri were found, in a village called ‘Izbat Kilo, Taha Hussein was born. He was to become one of the most important Egyptian literary figures of the twentieth Century, as a novelist, critic, editor and, eventually, minister of Education.<sup>11</sup>

Despite his early education, first in the traditional Islamic style at al-Azhar University and then at the new, secular Cairo University, Hussein’s first encounter with this text did not come until he was studying in Paris at the Sorbonne 1914-1919, where he read it in French translation.<sup>12</sup> When he returned to Egypt in 1919 he wanted to teach the work to his own class at Cairo University. Yet, although this text was Egyptian – the papyrus having come from Egypt – they would have been forced to read it in European translation. He was ashamed to teach Aristotle to his students in a modern European language when it had been discovered on their native soil.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, he was forced to translate it into Arabic himself and in 1921 the second Greek text translated into modern Arabic to be published in Egypt was the relatively obscure and incomplete Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians*.<sup>14</sup>

The journey of this text, from Egypt, to Europe, then back to Egypt, in a different language and different context, is an embodiment of the problems that Taha Hussein faced as well as the wider complications of cultural exchange in a colonial context. In his writing, he was insistent that Greek culture was an indigenous and crucial part of Egyptian history and that Egyptians should study it themselves, not

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<sup>11</sup> Hussein’s importance hardly needs establishing. In addition to his many publications in a range of genres, some of his credentials include: First winner of State Grand Prize for Literature in 1958, First Egyptian to be nominated for (though did not win) the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949, Minister of Education 1950-1952.

<sup>12</sup> Abdelrashid Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain’s Education: From the Azhar to the Sorbonne* (Richmond: Curzon, 1998), 116.

<sup>13</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Niẓām al-Athīnīyyīn [Constitution of the Athenians]* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1921), 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> The first text I have found to be published in modern Arabic is Herodotus’ *Histories* published in 1887 in Beirut by Ḥabīb Bustrus, translated from the French, under the title *Tārīkh Ḥirūdūtus al-Shahīr*. The first to be published in Egypt was Sulayman al-Bustani’s *Iliad* in 1904. Books about ancient Greece had been published, as well as translations of European versions of ancient Greek stories, selected passages of Greek Drama and in 1912 Oedipus was performed at the Opera House. Yet, this was, as far as I have discovered, the second modern translation of a full Greek text published in Egypt

relying on European scholars for information about it; Egyptians should be masters of their own history, especially at a time when the Egyptian independence movement was gaining strength.<sup>15</sup> Yet, there was always a European presence lurking in the background with a derailing influence upon the process, be it Budge or the scholars of the Sorbonne who first brought the text to Taha Hussein's attention. It was never quite as simple as it ought to be.

Much has been written about Taha Hussein's view of Egypt's position in relation to 'Europe', the 'Arab world' and the 'East'. The most comprehensive study of Taha Hussein in English remains Pierre Cachia's 1956 book *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance*.<sup>16</sup> In Arabic there is Gaber Asfur's [b. 1944] *al-Marāyā al-Mutajāwira*.<sup>17</sup> More recently Abdelrashid Mahmoudi has published a book on *Taha Hussein's Education: From al-Azhar to the Sorbonne*<sup>18</sup> which tracks the development of his thought over his early career (mostly concerned with the period of his education up to 1919 but actually ending in 1938 with the publication of *The Future of Culture in Egypt*).

All of these books mention his discussions of ancient Greece but this theme is never central. Mahmoudi, whose coverage of this subject is the most extensive, devotes a small section (202-209) to Hussein's writing on the Greeks, which we shall look at in more detail later in the chapter, and the others only make passing reference to it. To ignore or give only a brief airing to the construction of ancient Greece and its relationship to modern Egypt in Taha Hussein's writing is to miss a central and crucial part of his thoughts on culture and 'cosmopolitanism'. This aspect of his work can help construct a picture of Hussein's engagement with issues of Egyptian identity in all its complexity; a picture that is often hard to see *without* reference to this discussion. It will also help us to see the importance of *Oedipus Tyrannos* as a play in modern Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

A key feature of twentieth century nationalism was the use of history, often ancient history, to construct a genealogy and character for the modern nation. Hussein's Hellenism is

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<sup>15</sup> In 1922 Britain officially granted Egypt a degree of independence but it was not until 1952, or perhaps 1956 when then British were expelled from the Canal Zone, that Egypt won full independence

<sup>16</sup> (London: Luzac, 1956)

<sup>17</sup> (Cairo: GEBO, 1983)

<sup>18</sup> (London: Curzon, 1998)

<sup>19</sup> As this chapter will discuss later, Peter Pormann is a rare contemporary example of someone writing about Taha Hussein's work on the Greeks. See also: Luc Barbulesco, 'L'Itinéraire Hellénique de Ṭāhā Ḥusayn', *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 95-98 (2009): 297-305.

only one of these models but it is one of the most instructive cases. This is not because it gives us any clear answers but for the opposite reason. The role of Greece in the history of the ancient Near East is always changing, problematised and debatable. 'The Greeks' can be constructed in a myriad of different ways depending on perspective and preconceptions. They can represent the philosophers of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, the conquering Alexander, the subsequent Hellenistic kingdoms based in Alexandria, the Greeks as conceived by modern Europe as the ancestors of that culture, or indeed, the modern Greeks living in Egypt in the early twentieth century. Complexity, therefore, is a defining and necessary factor of receiving Greek culture in Egypt as becomes clear from an analysis of Taha Hussein's works.

Just as the Greeks are multi-valent, so are Hussein's engagements with the Greeks. After all, as Renan's quote implies, there is no such thing as single natural cultural identity rather a number of cultural identities that can be constructed from any nation's palimpsestic history. The shifting nature of this engagement with the Greeks, far from being a weakness, is the strength of Hussein's argument and the fact that Hellenism itself can be used in so many ways is what makes it a profitable history to exploit for people seeking a complex picture of modern nationalism.

It is also important to consider Taha Hussein's more tangible efforts to promote Greek culture. By this I mean, partly, his numerous translations and academic discussions of Greek literature and history, including a translation of Aristotle, several translations of Greek tragedy and a historical analysis of 'Greek thought' (namely Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander [so-called] the Great, Julius Caesar). The other main aspect of his promotion of Greek culture came in the sphere of education. He taught at Cairo University from 1919 until 1950, with only brief gaps, and became Dean of Arts in 1928. He was also instrumental in founding a university in Alexandria in 1941 and acted as Minister of Education from 1950 until the 1952 revolution. Hussein was devoted to encouraging the teaching of Latin and Greek in Egyptian Universities and even secondary schools and encouraged others in personal correspondence to learn the languages.

Here too, Oedipus provides a useful lens through which to view these issues. I will conclude the chapter by looking at Taha Hussein's two translations of Oedipus and how they align with his ideas on Greece. The first, in 1939, was a more or less direct, prose translation of the Sophoclean text, largely influenced (as I will argue) by Paul Masqueray's 1922 French translation. This translation was used subsequently in at least two theatre productions. The second was his translation of Andre Gide's *Oedipe* which was published in 1946 along with a translation of Gide's *Thésée*.

'Dean of Arabic Literature' or 'Dean of Westernisation'?

Taha Hussein's modern legacy can be very divisive. In 2013, under Muhammad Mursi presidency, a bust of Hussein, erected in Minya after his death in 1973, was stolen. Scrap metal thieves were suspected but it was not possible to rule out the possibility of something more sinister. In their article on the 15<sup>th</sup> February the Egyptian Newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* [*al-Miṣrī al-yawm*] obtained a quote from a local Islamic organisation denying their involvement in the theft. Muhammad Salmawi was less certain and on the 16<sup>th</sup> February he connected the theft (or, in his words, destruction [*kasr*]) of Taha Hussein's head with the veiling of a statue of the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum in the same week. For him they were both part of a misguided war by Islamic extremists on Egypt's cultural greats.<sup>20</sup>

But why was there an assumption that this theft could be connected to an Islamic group? Hussein managed, both during his life and after his death, to attract the ire of conservative Muslim groups. In part this was due to his attacks on the traditional Islamic university, al-Azhar, and his attempts to historicise the Islamic past beyond the bounds some found acceptable. However, another major reason for the hostility to Taha Hussein is that he was believed to be promoting a Western culture at the expense of Egypt's Islamic heritage and wanting to turn Egypt into a European country, ignoring its Arabic and Islamic past. This appears in different ways and with different degrees of ferocity. One of the more strident critics of Taha Hussein has been Anwar al-Jindi who called him (instead of his usual nickname "the dean of Arabic literature") the "dean of Westernisation".<sup>21</sup>

This has proved a potent and long-lasting critique and people have been able to find much to support it. For instance, to begin her article on "The Fascination of an Egyptian Intellectual with Europe: Taha Husayn and France" Samar Attar quotes a famous line from the 1938 *Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fī Miṣr* [*The Future of Culture in Egypt*] as her epigram: "Egypt does not belong to the East but to Europe and the West. Culturally, the Egyptians must work together with Europeans."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The theft was first reported in *al-Masry al-Youm* 15 February 2013. Muḥammad al-Salmāwī's article *jahl al-liḥā wa-l-jalālīb* [*The Ignorance of Beards and Jalabiyyas*] appeared in *al-Masry al-Youm* 16 February, 2013. Articles in English appeared in *Daily News Egypt* 17 February, 2013 under the title 'Bust of Taha Hussein Disappears in Minya' and *ahramonline* 21 February, 2013 under the title 'Is nothing sacred now?'

<sup>21</sup> 'Amīd al-taghrīb in e.g. Anwar al-Jindī, *Tāhā Husayn : Ḥayātuhu wa-Fikruhu fī Ḍaw' al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-I'tisām, 1976). This phrase is now commonly used to refer to Hussein amongst his enemies in places like Salafi online forums, as a quick Google search can confirm.

<sup>22</sup> Samar Attar, 'The Fascination of an Egyptian Intellectual With Europe: Taha Husayn and France', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2006): 13–32. Quote from 13.

However, this charge has seemed unfair to those who point to his deep and varied engagement with Arabic literature and culture. His doctoral thesis at Cairo University in 1914, for instance, was on the poet al-Ma‘arri and he published books on pre-Islamic Arabic poetry in 1926 and a work on the life of the Prophet Muhammad in 1933. Unlike some other intellectuals of the time he wrote in Arabic (rather than French) and was an avid proponent of Classical Arabic over colloquial, partly for reasons of Arabic unity.

It has, therefore, seemed illogical to many simply to designate Taha Hussein as an anti-Arabic “Europeaniser”. In his introduction to a collection on Taha Hussein’s educational writings Sa‘id Ibrahim ‘Alī gives an example of Taha Hussein’s connection with the Arab world from an article in *al-Risāla* written 26 December, 1938 in which Hussein says after a visit to the Levant, “I saw that the Egyptian mind was closer to the Syrian and Palestinian mind, communicated more freely with it and was more influenced by it, than the French or American mind.” ‘Alī comments sarcastically, “Yes it was Taha Hussein who wrote that, the man accused by some of supporting Western culture above Arabic culture.”<sup>23</sup>

Instead of attempting to trade competing examples of Hussein’s promotion of European culture against his support for Arabic culture, this chapter focuses on Taha Hussein’s work on Greece to find a ‘third way’ to think through his cultural attachments, a way that exposes the ragged edges of ‘national’ belonging. The place that Greece occupies Egyptian history makes it a particularly rich case, through which to explore the contradictions of ‘East’ and ‘West’ as constructions and how they can work in the twentieth century and help develop models of cross-cultural artistic production that I introduced in earlier chapters.

Greek history can be used in a number of different ways. In one respect, it can break down the hard boundaries between East and West in Egypt. Egypt has a Greek history and Greece too has an Egyptian history so Greece is not the cultural property of Europe or the West. The ancient past offers Egyptians global history that they can rightly claim as their own. Despite this, I do not want to use ancient Greek history to show an unproblematic view of cosmopolitanism in modern Egypt. Ancient Greece’s place in Egyptian history, both in the twentieth century and in ancient times, cannot be separated from power, domination and colonialism. A close look at its history must engage with these problems that are always present in Hussein’s writing.

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<sup>23</sup> Sa‘id Ibrāhīm ‘Alī, *Turāth Tāhā Husayn [The Inheritance of Taha Hussein]*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmiyya, 2010), 26–37. Quote from 29.

Taha Hussein's work on the Greeks can be separated into three distinct periods. Of course, there are continuities in his work but it is important to challenge the assumptions of much scholarly work, which constructs a single dominant line running through his diverse work. This is a point made by Mahmoudi, in his book on the formation of Taha Hussein's intellectual ideas as a whole, as he criticises Gaber Asfur's work on Taha Hussein, *al-Marāyā al-Mutajāwira*, for wanting to assign a single philosophy to Taha Hussein's career. He says that "the work's value is diminished by its structuralist methodology", adding that his own book wants to "[part] company with that author's tendency to believe that Ṭāhā's critical thought underwent no essential change, falling as it were within one eclectic formula." Mahmoudi, conversely, "intend[s] to give a more vivid, more dynamic, and I hope, truer picture of Ṭāhā as an ever restless thinker who achieved stability rather late in life, and even then only relatively."<sup>24</sup>

Despite his criticism of Asfur, though, Mahmoudi's book still searches for some stability in Hussein's theories and is drawn to seek out one idea that can represent Hussein's "thought". He tends to see Hussein's later work as coming closer to his essence, emphasising *The Future of Culture in Egypt* [*Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fī Miṣr*] from 1938 as "later and more refined" than his earlier works and so more deserving of focus.<sup>25</sup>

A closer look at the place of Greece in the work of Taha Hussein demonstrates that historical constructions of national identity do not work in a linear way towards a 'correct answer' or unified theory, but are constantly being negotiated and constantly reacting to events. At the very least, I hope that this discussion – and the periodisation of Hussein's work that I propose – will draw some of the focus away from Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* and some perennially repeated sections of that book. A broader look at his career means that we can move beyond seeing this treatise as *the* quintessential example of Taha Hussein's 'Mediterranean cosmopolitanism' and the one representative of his view of the relationship between Greece, Egypt and the Arab world, to the exclusion of all his other work.<sup>26</sup>

My analysis falls into three main periods. The first deals with Hussein's writings from 1919-1925 when he was teaching Ancient History at Cairo University and when a large number of his translations from Greek and writings on Greek history were published. The second is the period surrounding the writing of *The Future of Culture in Egypt* in 1938. For

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<sup>24</sup> Mahmoudi *Taha Husain's Education*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Mahmoudi *Taha Husain's Education*, 238.

<sup>26</sup> Barbulesco, *L'Itinéraire Hellénique de Ṭāhā Husayn*, calls this book "the sharp-edged chrysalisation of all his thought."

some of this time he must also have been working on his translations of Sophocles' plays (including *Oedipus Tyrannos*) which were published in 1939. Finally, I will look closely at his work in the Journal *al-Kātib al-Misrī* [*The Egyptian Writer*], which was published from 1945 until 1948 and in whose pages the issue of non-Arabic (including Greek) influences on Arabic literature was discussed at length.

### Pre-Taha Hussein Hellenism

Taha Hussein's writing on the Greeks was unprecedented in Egypt for its quantity and breadth, especially for someone writing in the Arabic language. This does not mean that he was the first person in the country to note a connection between Egyptian and ancient Greek history. In the introduction to his 1913 book on the history of the Copts, for instance, Yusuf Manqarius had claimed that it was Copts [i.e. ancient Egyptians] leaving Egypt who "had, by emigration, populated Greece and founded Athens."<sup>27</sup>

Marilyn Booth, in her discussion of Zaynab Fawwāz's biographical dictionary of women notes that "Fawwaz featured far more Ptolemaic [Greek] women ... than Pharaonic women." Donald Reid also notes the prominent place given to Greek history in Sheikh al-Tahtawi's 1868 history of Egypt, *Anwār Tawfīq al-Jalīl fī Akhbār Miṣr wa-tawthīq Banī Ismā'īl*. Al-Tahtawi was the first modern author to write, in Arabic, about many of the things later taken up by Taha Hussein. For instance, he uses Herodotus as a source to argue that Greek mercenaries came to Egypt in the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, establishing early contact between the two civilisations. He also "took literally Herodotus' tale of Sesostri's (Rameses II) vast conquests in Europe" and, using Danaus' mythical Egyptian heritage (even speculating he might have been Rameses II's brother), he gave Greece an Egyptian inception story. This led him to call Greece the "Daughter of Egypt".<sup>28</sup>

Other writers also mentioned these ancient historical ties between Egypt and Greece (and through them the rest of the world). For instance, in the introduction to his 1868 French

<sup>27</sup> Samir Seikaly, 'Coptic Communal Reform: 1860-1914', *Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 3 (1970): 247-75. The quote (267-70) references Yūsuf Manqariyūs, *Tārīkh al-Umma al-Qibṭiyya: Madā al-'Sshrīn Sana al-Māḍiya, min sanat 1893 - 1912* [*History of the Coptic People: Period of the Last Ten Years 1893-1912*] (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Qiddīs Makāriyūs, 1913) where the ideas are 'generously sprinkled in the Introduction'.

<sup>28</sup> Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, 145-48. Quotes from 146. See also: Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Taḥṭāwī, *Anwār Tawfīq al-Jalīl fī Akhbār Miṣr wa-Tawthīq Banī Ismā'īl* [*The Illumination of Tawfīq the Great on the History of Egypt and the Descendants of Ismail*] (Cairo: Bulaq, 1868). For the mercenaries of the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty see: 112-13. For Rameses II's conquests see 77-79. For the story of Danaus and the quote "Daughter of Egypt" see: 80-81. He appears to think of Greece as a unified entity rather than a collection of smaller city states, as it likely was at the time.

Dictionary Muhammad Cadri says that “all the rays of civilisation came from Egypt which, having lit up Greece, were felt in every other nation which is today civilised.” This idea that Egypt was the source of Greece’s culture was one that, by the turn-of-the-century, had been proposed by a number of people. When al-Bustani’s *Iliad* was launched Shukur Pasha, the head of the Alexandria municipality, stood up and announced in French that “Egypt is the mother of civilisation and the source of the inspiration which fell upon the Greek poets.”<sup>29</sup>

There was, then, a history and background in Egypt to some of the claims that Hussein was making. However, his work does represent a substantial move beyond these earlier examples. Reid rightly says that “by 1914 no Egyptian had yet tried to make the Graeco-Roman heritage central to Egyptian national identity” as Hussein did.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, when people did try to make any connection between Greece and Egypt it was almost always the uncomplicatedly nationalist opinion that Egypt had been the true cradle of Greek civilisation. Taha Hussein’s work on this subject is more complex, nuanced and interesting.

#### 1919-1925: Teaching Ancient History at Cairo University

After Taha Hussein returned from the Sorbonne with a doctorate, having written his primary thesis on the Arabic historian Ibn Khaldun and a secondary one on Tacitus, he took up a job teaching Ancient History at Cairo University. At this time, he published and lectured prolifically both on Greek literature and history and on its relationship to Arabic and Egyptian culture. In the period from 1919-1925 he wrote several works on Greece (1919 *Ālihat al-Yūnān*, 1920 *Selections from Greek Drama*, 1921 *Constitution of the Athenians*, 1925 *Leaders of Thought* [first serialised in *al-Hilāl* 1925]).<sup>31</sup> He was intent on making translations of Greek works and works on Greek history available for an Egyptian public in the Arabic language. It

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<sup>29</sup> Mohamed Cadri, *Nouveau Guide de Conversation Francaise et Arabe* (Cairo: P. Cumbo, 1868), III. *Al-Muqtaṭaf* July, 1904 677. Other works also made reference to the Egyptian source of much Greek knowledge such as Onofrio Abbate Pasha, ‘La Mort de Socrate: Origine Égyptienne Du Pharmacon et Les Effets de La Ciguë’, *Mémoires Présentés À l’Institut Egyptien* III, no. IX (1899): 741–57, which argues for the Egyptian etymology of the Greek word Pharmacon on the basis that the Greeks took much of their knowledge from Egypt.

<sup>30</sup> Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, 139.

<sup>31</sup> The 1919 work on Greek gods is particularly difficult to find and I have not been able to consult a copy. Even the title is contested. Mahmoudi calls it *Ālihat al-Yūnān* (The Gods of Greece) and he describes it as a “summary of Taha’s first course of lectures during the academic year 1919-20” and containing “little of substance” (203–04). Taha Hussein’s official website (<http://www.tahahussein.org/?pg=works> [currently down]) listed a 1919 work about Greek religion by a longer title (*al-Zāhira al-Dīniyya ‘ind al-Yūnān wa Taṭawwur al-āliha wa-’Athruha fī-l-Madīna*) which is presumably the same work referred to. Mahmoudi sums up the argument in a way that makes it sound in tune with the rest of his ideas. The argument is that “for Egyptians to understand their own history and to gain access to modernity, they must therefore study the Greek heritage.” (205).



was also in this period that Hussein first seems to have first formulated and promoted his idea that interaction with ancient Greek culture had a formative effect on the Arab world and Egypt more specifically.<sup>32</sup>

The key basis of Hussein's argument(s) at this time was a desire to recognise the various different civilisations that made up the history of the Mediterranean region. He insisted that Egyptians should know about their Greek (as well as Roman, Coptic and Pharaonic) history:

“Who would believe that, of all the history of Greek literature and philosophy that survives, the most important and best preserved has been discovered in Egypt and that Egyptians are completely ignorant of these classics of literature and philosophy, just as they are ignorant of the fact that they were discovered in Egypt. In fact, they do not know a single thing about them.”<sup>33</sup>

As we have already seen in the introduction to his translation of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, he was responding to the discovery of the huge numbers of Greek papyri in Egypt and the reception they received in Europe. He was disappointed that even though they were part of Egypt's heritage Egyptians did not seem to care about these texts. And if they had cared about them, the texts were only available in European languages. So, as he wrote in his introduction to Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians*, it was shocking to think that what had been discovered in Egypt was not known there. In his own words, when he wanted to teach this text in his own class he “did not start the lesson out of shame that I would be working through a book discovered in Egypt and I have to read it in French or English translation. Reading the original Greek would not have been easy or useful, as none of the students at the University knew the language.”<sup>34</sup>

It was not just for the sake of the papyri that Egyptians should study the Greek language and culture but also to understand their past in a broader sense. In a 1923 article, he wrote: “It is not useful nor is it right to have, in Egypt, a very rich museum of Pharaonic history and the history of Egypt in the Greek and Roman period as well as a very rich museum of the

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that he had not previously written about the many layers of history in the region. In a speech made in the Government Workers' Club in Cairo and serialised in *al-Risāla* in 1910 he makes frequent references to the diverse historical influences on Arabic language and culture. I consulted the reprint of the article, which is also available, in *al-Muqtabas* magazine 7<sup>th</sup> *mujallad* 1912 (pt. 1 20–29 pt. 2 93–111).

<sup>33</sup> Tāhā Ḥusayn in *al-Ahrām* 07 February, 1921.

<sup>34</sup> Ḥusayn, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 7–8. Quotation from 8.

history of Egypt in the Islamic period, unless there is a worthwhile, decent school to study these antiquities that are stored in museums and distributed all across Egypt.”<sup>35</sup> Here he includes the Graeco-Roman period alongside the more conventionally cited Pharaonic and Islamic periods of Egypt’s history. Greek history was a part of Egypt’s heritage too and thus it was the duty of Egyptians to study it.

Greek history could open new ways of constructing Egypt’s present. In contrast to Pharaonic history, it is not only Egypt that was influenced by the Greeks but the whole Arab world too. He writes in 1920, “Understanding Egyptian history specifically and Islamic history more generally is built on understanding Greek history. No one should forget that Greek culture has had a clear influence on world culture, including the Islamic countries.”<sup>36</sup> Aristotle could be used as a perfect illustration of this. Taha Hussein, as well as many others, are quick to acknowledge Islamic thought’s debt to Aristotle. In the introduction to *Constitution of the Athenians* he remarks that “[Aristotle’s] philosophy was translated into Arabic in the Abbasid period and had a great effect on the Arab mind.”<sup>37</sup> Also in his review of Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid’s [1872-1963] 1924 translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* he makes several references to the fact that Arabs call Aristotle ‘The First Teacher.’<sup>38</sup>

This appreciation of the potential Arabness of the Greeks separates Taha Hussein from the Pharaonism of many Egyptian nationalists of the 1920s. A shared Greek history can unite the whole Arab world in a way that Pharaonism does not. It can also unite it in a different way to its Islamic history, opening up new points of contact and exchange. For Hussein, it was Alexander’s conquests that first brought this about.

In a set of articles which appeared in *al-Hilāl* magazine from 1924-5 (and were later released as *Leaders of Thought (Qādat al-Fikr)* Hussein tracks the development of Greek thought through various important figures, starting with Homer and going through Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. His penultimate ‘leader’ is Alexander the Great. Although not a ‘thinker’ himself, Hussein argues that he merits inclusion on the grounds that he brought ‘thought’ [*al-fikr*] from the sphere of philosophy to politics. His importance came, then, from his conquests, which spread Greek ideas through Asia and North Africa:

Alexander failed in this intellectual leadership during his lifetime, for he did not accomplish what he wanted as far as uniting the peoples [of Europe

<sup>35</sup> Husayn, *The Right Way to Study Antiquities* in *al-Sīyāsa* 13 July, 1923.

<sup>36</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Ṣuḥuf Mukhtāra Min al-Shi‘r al-Tamthīlī ‘inda al-Yūnān [Selections from Greek Dramatic Poetry]* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijārīya, 1920), 4.

<sup>37</sup> Husayn, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Husayn, *Wednesday Talk*, vol. 3, 47–57. See esp. 49.

and Asia], bringing their minds closer together, and founding a single, shared culture was concerned. However, he was victorious in this after his death because his military conquest implanted this [Greek] thought in all corners of the world that his armies trampled ... The 8<sup>th</sup> [sic, read: 4<sup>th</sup>] century had hardly finished before Greek culture was the culture of the ancient East and the Greek language was the language of the ancient East. The East began to be a part of [*yushārik*] Greece in their literature, arts, and philosophy until a special nature [*mizāj khāṣṣ*]<sup>39</sup> began to rise out of the mix between Easterners and Greeks, which you can find clearly if you study Alexandrian philosophy and literature. You can also see it if you visit museums and see the surviving antiquities that Greece and the East shared.<sup>40</sup>

Afterwards, this East that Alexander's campaign had united was conquered by the Arab armies and became the Arab world, without losing traces of its Hellenistic character. The use of Greek philosophy in the Medieval Arabic world did not come as a surprise to Hussein and he had explored it before this period. In a talk as early as 1910 in his discussion of the Abbasid Caliphate he notes that they "learnt the rules of Greek rhetoric from what they translated from the books of Aristotle."<sup>41</sup>

The introduction of Alexander, although it can be uniting in one way and although it allows for a different self-conception to Islamic history, also raises some dark implications for the modern Middle East. Mahmoudi, in his discussion of Hussein's engagement with the idea of Greece in this period, characterises it in disparaging terms. "The unity of the world was assumed to have been imposed, sometimes through conquest, by a rationalist, freedom-loving Europe on an Orient dominated by religion and political tyranny."<sup>42</sup> The references to modern colonialism in Mahmoudi's judgement are obvious. He wants to cast Hussein's Alexander as a westerner imposing his thought on the East and the East as a passive victim. The figure of Alexander shows the problems of using the Greeks to create a cosmopolitan model: power and domination always lurk behind.

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<sup>39</sup> The word *mizāj* can mean "temperament, nature, disposition" but can also mean "mixture, medley, blend", Hans Wehr and J Milton Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: (Arabic-English)* (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 1063. In the translation I take the first meaning, partly because *mazāj* is more frequently used to mean mixture in its simplest sense, but it is important to note that the word itself carries with it an idea of mixing, or hybridity

<sup>40</sup> Ḥusayn Qādat al-Fikr [*Leaders of Thought*] (Cairo : Idārat al-Hilāl, 1925), 101.. This theme is also echoed in the Introduction to *Constitution of the Athenians*, 17–20

<sup>41</sup> Taha Hussein's Speech from 1910 cited above in *al-Muqtabas* vol. 7 (1912), pt. 1 20–29, pt. 2 93–111. Quote from 100.

<sup>42</sup> Mahmoudi *Taha Husain's Education*, 237–38.

We should, however, allow for more nuances in Hussein's view than to say it is just a depiction of the European colonisation of the East and that the spread of Greek power is totally synonymous with a European-Style colonialism. Particularly, we must work with a rather more complex definition of 'Greece' that is not simply something 'European'.

Hussein's description of Athens, which he constructed as the centre and beacon of 'Greek thought', can help us think through the debate in a different way. The city, for him, was the progenitor of 'Greek mind' but it did not exclude or limit those who it welcomed. In the introduction to his translation of *The Constitution of the Athenians* he described Athens as "the universal [ 'āmm] school of the Greeks", open to anyone throughout the Greek world. His view of the extent of the Greek world was also not, as might be assumed today, limited to Europe. It included all three Mediterranean continents and he argued that "people travelled [to Athens] from every Greek area in Europe, Asia and Africa".<sup>43</sup> From his earliest work, Hussein's Greece did not stick to the boundaries of Europe as it was constructed in the twentieth Century.

Hussein also used the problematic figure of Alexander to further question what 'Greek' could mean. This man, whom Hussein credits with spreading the Greek mind, was not even necessarily himself Greek. Macedonia, Hussein says "was close to Greece in some respects and to Barbarianism in other, it claimed that it was Greek but Greece denied this".<sup>44</sup> Alexander was from Macedonia and Aristotle spent his formative years there but they both managed to become 'Greek', Hussein argued. In his description of these two quintessential Greeks it is hard not to see an echo of his Egypt. Macedonia and Egypt are places on the fringes of the Greek world, which are at times pushed away from the traditional definition of Greek but are also inseparable from it. If Aristotle and Alexander could be Greek, then so could Taha Hussein.

There is yet another layer to this debate that goes beyond the events of the ancient past. Even if ancient Greece had not previously been inextricably linked to Europe, it is hard to argue that Greece was not at this point associated with 'Western civilisation' and that colonial powers made a special claim to it. Western culture also claimed a cultural superiority to Arabic culture and Taha Hussein looked West for his inspiration. Comparing the French capital directly to Greece he spoke admiringly of both. "Greeks used to turn to Athens as Easterners turn to Paris."<sup>45</sup> In his introduction to *Selections from Greek Drama* Hussein went

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<sup>43</sup> Husayn, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Husayn, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Husayn, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, 15.

through the several reasons Egyptians should learn Greek and study Greek writings. One of them is that this is the way they could follow the progress of Europe. For the modern European Renaissance was “for the most part influenced by Greek antiquities.”<sup>46</sup> By rediscovering the Greeks, Egypt can have its own renaissance on the same lines.

This idea that Egypt had to catch up with Europe was a very common one in the 1920s. However, Taha Hussein’s use of the Greeks to think through it adds a new dimension to the debate. It is in going back to the Greeks that there could be a renaissance that brought the Arab world up to the political and scientific level of Europe (as Taha Hussein would have it) without having to abandon its own culture. For him, Egypt could raise itself to the level of Europe without having to simply follow Europe if they looked to their own neglected Greek history. “If Egypt, in its renaissance, wants to attempt (as it should) to find out about this [European] Renaissance and understand it, so it can choose from [the European Renaissance] the things which agree with their nature and accord with their way of thinking, then the only way to do this is to study the history of the Greeks and the Romans.”<sup>47</sup>

The complexity of Hussein’s construction of ancient Greek culture in this period shows a part of the myriad of conflicting ways that cultural history could be mobilised in Egypt. As well as being the basis of European culture, Greece was also part of Egyptian history. Furthermore, Greece, in ancient times was far from monolithic. Whether it was Athens, receiving cultures from across the Mediterranean, or Alexander, whose status as a Greek was itself unsure, ‘Greece’ could be brought into play in many different ways.

Realising the nuances in possible ways to read Greek history sheds light on the nuances of Hussein’s attempts to deal with the realities of 1920s Egypt. 1919 saw widespread protests in Egypt calling for Independence from British rule. In 1922 Egypt won its official independence, although British colonial power did not disappear at this point. The period was, therefore, a time when intellectual debate in Egypt was deeply concerned with how an independent, self-governing Egypt should best be arranged. It is not coincidence, then, that Hussein was so interested in the ways that Athens ruled itself and wanted to share this with his countrymen, in Arabic. It is in this context that we should read Hussein’s use of the Greeks in this period.

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<sup>46</sup> Husayn, *Selections from Greek Dramatic Poetry*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Husayn, *Selections from Greek Dramatic Poetry*, 5. Although he had not mentioned the Romans in the previous quotation he feels it necessary to mention them now. It is not uncommon, though nor is it universal, to see Taha Hussein add the Romans to an end of a mention of the Greeks. Though, at other times he notes that Roman culture was just a copy of the Greek

His turn back to ancient history to construct a new Egypt led Hussein to formulate a model that differed in important ways from many other discussions in the period. It is worth comparing some of his arguments to those of others at the time who were asking Egyptians to look back at another part of their history: Pharaonists. Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid was one of the main proponents of the use of Pharaonic history to shape modern Egypt and also a great patron of Hussein. “The benefit of understanding Pharaonic and Arab monuments ... is not limited to the pleasure of seeing the beautiful monuments and feeling the greatness in the remembrance of Egypt’s glorious past. There is an even more powerful benefit, and that is to use knowledge of the past to heal the present, to replace it with an auspicious future.”<sup>48</sup> Al-Sayyid, calls upon Egyptians to look back to this particular part of their history to make their future.

Al-Sayyid himself did translate Aristotle into Arabic but it is the Pharaonic past that shaped his vision for a new Egypt. The Pharaohs appear to offer Egyptians a less complex vision of a new nationalism. They are very much portrayed as Egyptian territorial nationalists. Colla states that “for Egyptian intellectuals, Pharaonic civilization was now becoming inextricably linked to the land of Egypt and seen as the unique product of its geography. This shift from understanding Pharaonic Egypt as a distinct historical period to conceiving it as a shared experience of place, was crucial for reaching across time and for creating a new sense of national patrimony.”<sup>49</sup> Defining the national borders of Egypt by Pharaonic history obviously has its complexities, not least how to theorise Sudan and the stretches of desert towards Libya in one direction and the Levant in the other. Yet, these problems were easier to elide.

Hussein’s Greeks offer a challenge to this way of thinking about Egypt. Greek civilisation was undeniably part of Egypt’s history and civilisation but it is cannot be conceived as autochthonous in the same way that the Pharaohs were. Hussein was creating a model of an Egypt that conceptually extended beyond the Nile valley to the East and to the West but is still grounded in its own history. This was a form of national self-construction that highlighted the hybridity of the Egyptian nation not a simple line back to the Pharaohs and a wish to return to a time when Egypt dominated the world. For al-Sayyid. “The Egyptians formed an important expansionist nation, proceeding in its empire along the most modern lines

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<sup>48</sup> al-Sayyid, ‘al-Āthār al-Qadīma’, 14. Cited, translated into English, in Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 151. Colla puts him at the centre of his discussion of this phenomenon.

<sup>49</sup> Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 134.

of European colonialism today.”<sup>50</sup> In contrast to Hussein’s Greeks, which had a complex relationship to power and certainly did not offer a triumphalistic view of the past, al-Sayyid wanted a model that allowed Egypt to occupy the place at the top of the pile again.

Detractors could say that Hussein was simply aggrandising former colonisers of Egypt. It is more productive to argue he was trying to think through a new way to look at the relationship between different parts of the world. Hussein was trying to think through a ‘Greek’ Egypt that could be an empire of the mind: built on thought rather than, for instance, military might. He was trying to construct a history for Egypt could be open to the world around it and also grounded in the Egyptian nation, rejecting the importance of neither. This was a difficult task and one that was importantly distinct the Pharaonism of others.

Hussein argued that it was not a rejection of Egyptian-ness to be interested in the Greeks; in fact, not to study the Greeks was a rejection of a major part of Egyptian history.<sup>51</sup> It was incumbent on Egyptians to ensure that they could study their own history themselves (Pharaonic as well as Greek) and not have to rely on European Schools and Universities:

We are still forced, if we want to study the history of Egypt, to go on educational missions to London and Paris to study Egyptian antiquities in their museums. Are there not ancient Egyptian antiquities and Arabic Muslim as well as Greek and Roman antiquities? Could we not set up a special institute whose mission would be to study these antiquities which could train teachers and experts to teach and to organise and preserve these antiquities? <sup>52</sup>

This model does not entirely efface the relationship between ancient Greece and modern European imperialism, as this chapter will discuss later. Still, Hussein was trying, in the 1920s, to use Greek history to move towards a new, cosmopolitan Arabic Renaissance which he could stay true to Arabic and Egyptian culture. At the end of his review of Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid’s translation of Aristotle Hussein comments: “Aristotle was the basis of the first Arab Renaissance [in Abbasid Baghdad], the basis of the modern European renaissance, and it should be the basis of the intellectual revolution in modern Egypt.”<sup>53</sup> It is through this use of the Greek past that Hussein attempts to arrive at this goal.

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<sup>50</sup> al-Sayyid, ‘al-Āthār al-Qadīma’, 13. Cited, translated into English, in Colla *Conflicted Antiquities*, 148.

<sup>51</sup> See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 337. “[For Taha Hussein] knowledge of the classics is an essential implication of Egyptian nationalism.”

<sup>52</sup> Husayn, *Selections of Greek Dramatic Poetry*, 3. See also *al-Ahrām*, 7 February, 1921.

<sup>53</sup> Husayn, *Wednesday Talk*, vol. 3, 57.

### 1938: *The Future of Culture in Egypt*

Hussein's important book *The Future of Culture in Egypt* [*Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fī Miṣr*] represents a shift in his thought from the 1919-1925 period. Written in a different political moment, the book uses Egypt's Greek history, which it shares with Europe, in a very different way to show that Egypt is a Western, not an Eastern, country and that it should follow a European model.

Hussein did not stop writing about Greece between 1925 and 1938. In 1933, for example, he translated into Arabic Jean Racine's *Andromaque*.<sup>54</sup> As well as translating Greek texts he frequently encouraged the teaching of Greek (and Latin) in Egyptian schools and universities. In *The Future of Culture in Egypt* he devotes a long section to outlining the history of teaching Latin and Greek in Egypt. Besides praising the work of 'Ali Mahir Pasha in promoting the teaching of these languages, Hussein also details his own efforts to promote Classics teaching. Hussein was forced out of the Faculty of Arts of Cairo University in 1932, after the politically motivated revival of claims that his 1926 book on pre-Islamic poetry was anti-religious. After that Hilmi 'Isa Pasha abolished the Classical studies department. In 1934, when Hussein returned to his job at the university "the war over Latin and Greek came back again" and with the help of Naguib al-Hilali Pasha the Classics department was re-instated. He then gives details of the various people, Egyptian and European, with whom he had arguments about the teaching of Classics in Egypt and his unflinching support of the subject, concluding that "resistance [to teaching Latin and Greek] is sentencing the Egyptians to ignorance of their own history, except what they know from foreigners. I do not think there is anyone who supports Egyptian patriotism and national pride who would be comfortable with this obvious shame."<sup>55</sup>

Hussein also personally encouraged many in the 1920s to study Greek and Latin and Egypt's ancient past. A letter to Hussein from scholar of Hebrew literature Fu'ad Hasanayn 'Ali, when he was a student in Munich, confirms this; he writes "I will use your valuable

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<sup>54</sup> This was acted by George Abyad's troupe in 1936. Abyad, *Jurj Abyad*, 206.

<sup>55</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa Fī Miṣr* [*The Future of Culture in Egypt*] (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1938). Section 34: 161–72. The account in this book forms the basis of the accounts of contemporary scholars about teaching Latin and Greek in Egypt. For instance, Pormann, 'The Arab "Cultural Awakening (Nahḍa)", 1870-1950, and the Classical Tradition'. See esp. 17–19. Reid, 'Cromer and the Classics', 16 adds some of the reminiscences of the first Egyptian classics graduate Muhammad Salim Salem, amongst other things.



advice and give Latin and Greek their due care and attention”.<sup>56</sup> Muhammad Mandur [1907-1965], who became an important literary and theatrical scholar, was also encouraged in his endeavours by Hussein. Louis Awad [1915-1990] said of Mandur that he “knows his Greek and Latin well”<sup>57</sup> and Mandur himself wrote of his debt to Hussein in a personal letter: “as people said they were students of Imam Muhammad Abduh, and as they said of old, ‘we are students of Socrates or Aristotle’ ... we are students of Doctor Taha Hussein.”<sup>58</sup> Awad was also grateful for Hussein’s promotion of Classics, dedicating his translation of Horace’s *Ars Poetica* to the revered scholar.<sup>59</sup>

It is to his 1938 *The Future of Culture in Egypt* that most people turn to read about his views on Greece. It is one of his only non-literary works translated into English and one of the most frequently cited of all his works.<sup>60</sup> Mahmoudi considers this to be “a later more refined version of Ṭāhā’s humanism” and he says that his “comments will [in the conclusion] be addressed [to *this* text].”<sup>61</sup> Across modern scholarship, it is this book that is seen to represent Hussein’s thought. In Albert Hourani’s chapter on Hussein in *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, 19 out of the 21 references to Hussein’s work are to *The Future of Culture in Egypt*.<sup>62</sup>

In fact, the exemplary status that has been accorded to this book as the definitive statement of Hussein’s opinion on the place of ancient Greece in Egypt is (as I hope to show) somewhat undeserved. This book is just one of the many approaches that Hussein took towards the relationship between Greece and Egypt. It clearly builds on Hussein’s arguments from 1919-1925 and many of the underlying ideas are familiar from the previous section. The historical overlap between Greece and Egypt, for instance, is an important basis for wider

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<sup>56</sup> Letter of 07 August, 1930. Reprinted in Aḥmad Zakarīyā Shalaq and Muḥammad Ṣābir ‘Arab, eds., *Awraq Ṭāhā Husayn Wa-Murāsālātuh [Papers and Correspondence of Taha Hussein]*, vol. 1 1925-1940 (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmiyya, 2007), 63–66. Quote from 63.

<sup>57</sup> Louis Awad, *Advisory Memorandum for Franklin Publications* 25 October, 1952. Available in Princeton’s Mudd Library.

<sup>58</sup> Letter dated 07 June, 1929 in Shalaq and ‘Arab eds. *Papers and Correspondence of Taha Hussein*, vol. 1, 43–44.

<sup>59</sup> Luwīs ‘Awad, *Fann al-Shi’r [The Art of Poetry]* (Cairo, 1947). It includes the original dedication to Taha Hussein from 28/06/1938. ‘Awad also later translated Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* into Arabic (which was published in 1960).

<sup>60</sup> First published as Taha Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, 1954) trans. Sidney Glazer and reprinted in 1975.

<sup>61</sup> Mahmoudi *Taha Husain’s Education*, 238

<sup>62</sup> Hourani *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 324–40. It is interesting to note that, despite [or perhaps because of] Mahmoudi’s criticism of Jābir ‘Uṣfūr’s *al-Marāyā al-Mutajāwira* that it views Hussein’s thought structurally and not chronologically, this book puts very little emphasis on *The Future of Culture in Egypt*.

statements that Hussein makes in his new book.<sup>63</sup> “It is a waste of time to make an effort to expound in detail the relationship between Egypt and the culture of the ancient Aegean, the relationship between Egypt and the culture of Greece in its first ages, then the relationship between Egypt and Greece in its golden ages, from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. to the time of Alexander”, he writes. Instead of detailed descriptions he summarises it thus: “the Egyptian mind communicated ... with the Greek mind since the very first ages in a way based on cooperation and agreement, with a mutual exchange which still continues in an organised, beneficial way.”<sup>64</sup> Thoughts like this that would not be out of place in his earlier writings.

*The Future of Culture in Egypt* certainly added new angles to the broader construct of Graeco-Egyptian cultural exchange. Mahmoudi has very positive things to say, for example, about one new aspect of his argument. In this new book “there is no conqueror or conquered ... Instead there is a centuries old give and take of sorts.”<sup>65</sup> Mahmoudi approves of this new version where Egypt didn’t simply become Greek by being conquered by Alexander and ruled by the Ptolemies but by ‘cooperation’, ‘agreement’ and ‘mutual exchange’. This new theorisation managed to dodge some of the imperial undertones that Mahmoudi previously found uncomfortable.

The depictions of power in this book are complicated. Hussein does seem to promote a model of culture exchange based on equality rather than conquest when he says “The Egyptian mind, *up to the Age of Alexander*, influenced and was influenced by the Greek mind, sharing many of its qualities, if not all of them.”<sup>66</sup> However, conquest and imperialism are not totally effaced from the narrative. He still seems to hold that it was Alexander’s conquest which really spread the ‘Greek mind’ in Egypt: “When Alexander had conquered the East and set up his successors in it, contact between Greek civilisation and the East intensified, especially in the case of Egypt. Egypt became a Greek state or quasi-Greek [*ka-l-yunānīyya*] state, and Alexandria became one of the great Greek capitals of the world.” The conqueror, Alexander, imposing his culture on conquered Egypt cannot be written out.

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<sup>63</sup> In this text, probably for reasons of the very Egyptian context (as I will explain below), he does not pay much attention to the wider Arab world but focuses his arguments on Egypt.

<sup>64</sup> Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 20

<sup>65</sup> Mahmoudi *Taha Husain’s Education*, 209

<sup>66</sup> Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 25 (my emphasis). This is in marked contrast to Tāhā Husayn, *Leaders of Thought*, 63. Here, in a discussion of Eastern influence on Greece in the time of Socrates: “I think ... that the East had no influence worth mentioning on Greek philosophy, the Greek mind, or Greek politics.”

There are important – and unexpected – shifts in his argument, too. Almost all commentators note that we should read this text, as Hussein himself instructs us in the introduction, in its specific context. That is, as a reaction to the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936, which meant that Britain withdrew its troops from Egypt, and the Montreux Convention of 1937, which ended a system of capitulations which placed certain foreign nationals above the law in Egypt.<sup>67</sup>

The period of 1919-1925 had seen Egypt take steps towards independence but in the late 1930s it was going further. Hussein was again, in this context, thinking about how Egyptians now that they, largely, had political equality could have equality on other levels. His answer to this question is surprising. “Carried away by enthusiasm, and throwing moderation to the winds”, Cachia says, “he branded as an indefensible absurdity the notion that Egyptians are or ever were Orientals at all.”<sup>68</sup>

To justify this view, Hussein split the world into two poles. The first was the Far East and the other was Western Europe. He argued that, because Egypt clearly has more in common with Paris than it does with Japan, it should be seen as a Western country. This, to him was the only logical place to locate Egypt, culturally. “Egyptians see themselves as Easterners... in mind and culture. So they think they are closer to an Indian, a Chinese man and a Japanese man than they are to a Greek and Italian, or a Frenchman. I have been able to understand many errors, swallow many falsehoods and interpret many delusions but I have not been able, nor will I ever be able, to understand this hideous error or swallow this strange delusion.”<sup>69</sup> Egypt, Hussein asserted, was Western, even if Egyptians did not realise it.

Again, it was the ancient Greeks who were enlisted to support Hussein’s point about the modern Egyptian character. Not only did he stress the influence of the Greeks on Egypt, as he had before, but he almost went as far as to make the Greeks (and to an extent the Romans) the only influence on Egyptian culture. Taking Paul Valéry’s description of Europe as a mix of the Greek, the Roman and the Christian, he applied it to Egypt, as the Greek, the Roman

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<sup>67</sup> David Semah, *Four Egyptian Literary Critics* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 118; Pierre Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance* (London: Luzac, 1956), 61–63. Mahmoudi Taha Hussein’s *Education*, 239. Ḥusayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 11–12. Hussein says that “Egypt gained a lot of hope that it might realise external independence and internal control” in this period.

<sup>68</sup> Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 89.

<sup>69</sup> Ḥusayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 15–30 (and *passim*). Quote from 22.

and the Islamic.<sup>70</sup> Yet for, Hussein, the religions made these places doubly Greek. For Islam (as Christianity) was structured in a Greek way. “Christianity had connections with Greek philosophy before the appearance of Islam and influenced it and was influenced by it. It Christianised philosophy and philosophised Christianity. Likewise, Islam had connections with Greek philosophy and influenced and was influenced by it. So philosophy was Islamised and Islam was philosophised.”<sup>71</sup> Far from taking away the Greek character from Egypt and the Middle East, Hussein argued that (due to its Greek components) “when Islam spread in the Near and Far East, the power of the Greek mind spread and expanded to countries it had seldom been to before.”<sup>72</sup>

Previously, he had insisted that Greece was one part of Egyptian history that Egyptians, thus, had a duty to study and proposed that Greek history could be used to follow the development of Europe without having to become ‘European’. Here, he was using Greece to show that Egypt, in all its aspects, *was* European. This difference is important. It allowed Hussein to say it was necessary that “we follow the Europeans’ way and tread their path to become their peers. We should become their partners in culture, in good and bad, in sweet in bitter, in what it loveable and what is hateable, in what should be thanked and what should be reproached.”<sup>73</sup> Egypt should become entirely European.<sup>74</sup>

This European focus, although it had roots in his previous work, was a radical diversion from his previous conclusions. David Semah says that “It is to be noted that no antecedents for this theory can be found in Taha Husayn’s earlier discussion on this subject, such as his argument with Tawfiq al-Hakim in 1933.”<sup>75</sup> In these arguments in 1933 which started as a response to the publication of Tawfiq al-Hakim’s *Ahl al-Kahf*, Hussein argued that Egyptian character was made up of: 1) the Egyptian element which came from the physical qualities of Egypt such as the Nile and the deserts; 2) the Arabic elements which came in language and religions and culture; 3) the foreign elements which had influenced Egypt over

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<sup>70</sup> Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 30. Ernest Renan, *L’Islamisme et la science* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1883), 2 : “Nous autres Français, par exemple, nous sommes Romains par la langue, Grecs par la civilisation, Juifs par la religion”, expresses a very similar opinion to Valéry. (cited from Pormann ‘Classics and Islam: From Homer to al-Qā’ida’, 203.)

<sup>71</sup> Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 26.

<sup>73</sup> Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Problematic as this suggestion obviously is, we should be fair to Taha Hussein and at least say that he thought that Europeans also had a responsibility to treat them as equals as they clearly came from the same culture. He complains that Europeans “in their conduct and policies treat Egypt as part of the East and Egyptians as Easterners.” (24).

<sup>75</sup> Semah *Four Egyptian Literary Critics*, 119.

the years: “The Greek, Roman, Jewish and Phoenician in ancient times, the Arabs, the Turks and the Franks in the Middle Ages, America and Europe in modern times”.<sup>76</sup>

Even in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* itself, the simple view that Egypt and Europe should be seen as one entity did not hold up to very close scrutiny. Pierre Cachia speculates that:

[T]he patent one-sidedness with which [he] selects his historical evidence to support it makes one doubt whether it is not an exaggeration into which he was lured by political circumstances, or even a piece of disingenuous propaganda designed to silence objections to Modernism. Remarks made both before and after 1938 are not entirely consistent with a belief in the identity of Egyptian and Western mentalities, and it is particularly difficult to bring such a belief into line with the contention, perpetuated even in *Mustaqbal ath-Thaqāfah*, that religions born in neighbouring and equally Mediterranean Palestine are characteristic of the Oriental mind.<sup>77</sup>

In other places in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* Hussein again seemed to contradict his own insistence that there is no difference between the Egyptian and European mind. Speaking perhaps more rhetorically than precisely, he said, on the subject of finding money to build schools, that there would be enough money “if the ministry looked upon the issue from the considered Egyptian point of view, not the rich European point of view.”<sup>78</sup>

It should also be said that the book’s reception was, often, rather hostile. Gershoni and Jankowski note that “critical reviews of *The Future of Culture in Egypt* became something of a growth industry in 1939”. They discuss the arguments of Ahmed Amin, Hafez Mahmud and Sayyid Qutb [1906-1966], who were intent on maintaining the fundamental differences between the (broadly) spiritual East and the (broadly) materialistic West, though adding a few caveats. Despite certain superficial European adoptions, they argued that the Egyptian spirit remained Eastern. Some criticisms also provoked defences of Hussein. Ramsis Yunan and the Art and Liberty group attacked detractors who were accusing Taha Hussein of atheism and extremism. They also attacked the “reactionary movement” in Parliament who raised a question in Parliament criticising the minister of education for giving a job to “a man like Taha

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<sup>76</sup> Although he admits that Arabic influences can sometimes be ‘foreign’, he considered the Arabic language and religion something that has become part of Egypt and not ‘foreign’.

<sup>77</sup> Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Ḥusayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 75.

Hussein ... whose opinions [were] contrary to the customs, morals and religion of the country.” The book became a rallying point for people on both sides of the debate.<sup>79</sup>

One of the most comprehensive critiques of the work came in Qutb’s pamphlet *Naqd Kitāb Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fī Miṣr* [*Critique of the Book the Future of Culture in Egypt*].<sup>80</sup> He attacked Hussein’s eccentric idea that because Egypt is not like the Far East it must be Western, coming at the question from two angles. Firstly, although he did not advocate erasing the divisions Hussein that constructed for the world, he proposed a third pole in Hussein’s division of the world into a binary ‘East’ and ‘West’, namely the Arab world or as he put it “The Arab East and the Arab West and Egypt as the link between them”. So, Egyptians needed not choose between the Japanese and the French.<sup>81</sup> He also criticised Hussein for thinking that the West was a monolithic culture, noting for instance that the “democratic” and the “dictatorial” mind-sets are two antagonistic parts of the same Western culture.<sup>82</sup>

Qutb’s books also dealt directly with Hussein’s use of Greek history in Egypt but entered in to the debate from a very different angle. His re-interpretation of the Greek legacy of Egypt focused primarily on Hussein’s idea that there was productive cultural co-operation between Greek and Egyptians before Alexander, the very things that Mahmoudi complimented in his critique. Taha Hussein specifically talked about the Greeks who settled on Egyptian soil and used them as an example of this cultural contact:

Students learn in schools that Egypt has known Greece for a very long time and that the Pharaohs had established Greek colonies in Egypt before the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium B.C.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*, 51–52. Ahmed Amin does not so much attack Taha Hussein’s book as use it as a jumping off point from which to discuss materialism and spiritualism in *al-Thaqāfa* 10 January, 1939, 2–5. Ramsīs Yunān, ‘The Future of Culture in Egypt’, *al-Taṭawwur*, January 1940, 10–15. See also: ‘We are with Taha Hussein’, *al-Taṭawwur*, March 1940, 21. The “agents of reaction” [‘*awāmil al-raḡ‘iyya*] named by *al-Taṭawwur* were ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Fahmī, al-Shaykh Raḍwān al-Sayyid, Aḥmad Wālī al-Jundī, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Drāz and Aḥmad Muftāḥ Ma‘bad. *al-Risāla* also published a series of articles from 24 July, 1939 to 28 August, 1939 by Syrian Arab nationalist Sāṭi‘ al-Ḥuṣrī criticising the book. He spends a lot of time commenting on the teaching of Latin and Greek but connects it primarily to the European debate between learning dead languages and living ones, not as a part of Egyptian cultural identity.

<sup>80</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Naqd Kitāb Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fī Miṣr* [*Critique of the Book The Future of Culture in Egypt*] (Jeddah: al-Dār al-Sa‘ūdiyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1969). It was first published in *Ṣaḥīfat Dār al-‘Ulūm* in 1939 reprinted in Saudi Arabia in 1969.

<sup>81</sup> Qutb *Critique of the Book*, 11–13. Quote from 12.

<sup>82</sup> Qutb *Critique of the Book*, 12–13.

<sup>83</sup> Although there is archaeological evidence of contact between, for instance, Minoan and Egyptian civilisations, Hussein’s claim echoes al-Tahtawi’s writing about Egyptian settlements in Greece pg. 85.

And students also learn in schools that an eastern nation, far from Egypt invaded it and took control of it in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., the Persian nation. The Greeks [living in Egypt] only submitted to this foreign, Eastern power with hatred and they kept up a fierce resistance, sometimes resorting to Greek volunteers for this and at other times to alliances with Greek cities, up to the age of Alexander.<sup>84</sup>

Qutb opposed the view that there was any intellectual exchange between the Egyptians and Greeks around the 6<sup>th</sup> century and after, even if there was political alliance between the two. Qutb said, “the Doctor [Taha Hussein] does not want to admit that political disputes and agreements do not always mean disputes of mindsets [*‘aqaliyyat*] or their agreements. Neither in ancient nor in modern times.”<sup>85</sup> So even if the Egyptians were at war with the Persians it did not mean they did not share a mindset and just because they were allied politically with the Greeks it did not mean that they thought in a similar way. He added that there were many examples of countries who were politically connected but whose populations did not get along and that, for instance, Japan and China were at war even though their “mindsets”, as Taha Hussein would have it, were both Eastern.

Qutb’s argument explores the minutiae of Hussein’s statements about the Greeks. He also completely rejected the idea that, even if there were Greeks present at the time, there was any significant cultural exchange in the middle of the first millennium B.C. He supposed that “Greek colonies were allowed by some Pharaohs who were hated by the people, for mercenary Greek soldiers, to protect themselves from the wrath of the [Egyptian] people. [Perhaps] the Egyptians were hostile to those Pharaohs for their closeness to the Greeks and rejected association with those mercenaries, calling them ugly names.” Not only did Qutb disavow the idea of cultural contact, his description of the Greeks bore marked similarities to the British and their soldiers who exerted a significant degree of control in Egypt under then kings Fuad (and Farouq). Far from being like the Egyptians, the Greeks were more like the British. He had clearly done some research to support his arguments and took, directly from Herodotus, the example of Phanes, who politically aligned himself with the Persians although he was Greek and allied to the Egyptians. He defected to the Persian side and, treacherously helped them invade Egypt. Where, asked Qutab, did this example of a working alliance between Easterners and a Westerner against Egypt figure in Hussein’s construction?<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Husayn *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Qutb, *Critique of the Book*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Qutb, *Critique of the Book*, 14–15.

Qutb's critique, however, almost totally ignored Hussein's focus on Alexander and Alexandria in his construction of Greece. It seems strange for Qutb to have devoted so much time to the Greek colonies in Egypt and the war with Persia rather than to Alexandrian history. This decision does, however, highlight some important things about Egyptian engagements with Greece. By focusing on certain points in time or aspects of history and culture one can construct vastly different conceptions of Greece in Egypt. The heritage of Greece can be brought into play in different ways, whether it be as a colonised nation, or as the centre of an intellectual, supposedly cosmopolitan, Alexandrian world.

Here, again, we see ancient Greek history being used in different ways, by different writers, to think through what Egypt's place in the modern world was. In *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, his reading of Greek history seems to have taken Hussein to extremes, insisting that Egypt take on all the characteristics of Europe. Such a stridently essentialist view of national character, and one that would contradict what many people felt about Egypt, was never likely to gain widespread support. Despite the impression one gets from much scholarship on Taha Hussein, this view did not represent the culmination of his ideas. This was strikingly at variance with some of his earlier statements and only one way among many that he enlisted the Greeks in his ever-shifting attempts to think about Egypt.

#### 1945-1948: *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī*

The Second World War broke out shortly after the publication of *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. During the war, Hussein stepped up his activities defending the Free French cause. He was in charge of the broadcasts of *France Libre* in Cairo and, in 1941, received Charles de Gaulle in the studio.<sup>87</sup> In 1940 he wrote in the *Revue du Caire* "The cause of France is intimately linked to the causes of intellect and civilisation. We have been raised in the classical ideal that France perfectly represents."<sup>88</sup> He was also the first rector of Alexandria University (then Farouq University), founded in 1942, where he 'looked out for the classics'.<sup>89</sup> So, while he was certainly active in intellectual life during the war, the exceptional circumstances seem to have meant that he did not write about Greece a lot at the time.

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<sup>87</sup> Suzanne Taha Hussein, *Avec Toi: de la France à l'Égypte-- 'Un Extraordinaire Amour,' Suzanne et Taha Hussein (1915-1973)* (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 164.

<sup>88</sup> Taha Hussein, 'Voix de l'Égypte', *La Revue du Caire* 3:19, June 1940, 210. Cited in Hussein, *Avec Toi*, 164 n.1.

<sup>89</sup> Reid, 'Cromer and the Classics', 16.



The final important period of Hussein's thought on Greece and Egyptian identity was his time publishing the magazine *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* (The Egyptian Writer), which he founded in 1945 along with a small publishing house of the same name.<sup>90</sup> In this period he again became interested in the relationship between ancient Greece and the Arab world (as well as Europe and the Arab world). His views here, and his use of ancient Greece, diverged once more from his apparently programmatic statements in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* and from his ideas in the 1919-1925 period.

At this time, Hussein's focus was primarily on literature, rather than concepts such as a national 'mind' [*aql*] or even politics. *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* became a home for translations, literary discussions and serialised novels. In the late 1940s, I argue, Hussein's wider social and historical programme became embedded in literary writing and criticism. In literature, Taha Hussein found a new way to look at the Greek influence in Egypt one that differed in its focus from *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, which was more concerned with broader questions of history, definitions of culture and education.

The first issue of *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* was published in October 1945 and included a programmatic three-page opening article (entitled *al-barnāmij* [the programme]). The name of the journal itself is worth discussing; its origin was the statue of the *Seated Scribe* in the Louvre Museum, an ancient Egyptian statue from the third millennium BC of what appears to be a scribe writing. Beyond being a nationalist symbol of the heritage of Egypt, this sculpture also represented Hussein's shift towards an explicitly literary way of engaging with nationalism. "It is said that the Egyptian people were the first to write with a pen," began the first volume.<sup>91</sup> The journal, and its title, were indicative of a close focus on texts and cultural output as ways to look at the nation.

Hussein did not entirely reject historical ideas of identity but in the 'programme' for the new magazine, his views of Egypt were very different from those he espoused in 1938 in *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. Here, rather than a part of the West, Egypt became a central node for cultural traffic and a place ready to exchange ideas with the whole world:

Egypt is a Mediterranean country, its geographical position has allowed it to stand out amongst the countries of the Near East in its wealth, power and culture. Its geographical position, in so far as it is not placed on any extreme has allowed it to avoid egotism, self-centred-ness and severing ties with other

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<sup>90</sup> For works published by *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* see Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 258–60. They are mostly translations from European works but include some editions of old Arabic texts and original works.

<sup>91</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 1:1 (October 1945), 1.

parts of the world, near or far... It has a long history of co-operation with ancient civilisations and with the Greeks especially. Then it co-operated with Rome as it had done with Athens<sup>92</sup> before that. Then it took up with Damascus, Baghdad, and Cordoba. Now it continues this with all the countries of East and West. It brings to the East the best knowledge of the West and bring to the West the best of what the East has in heritage and great, eternal culture.<sup>93</sup>

“Egypt is a Mediterranean country”, wrote Hussein. But here it meant something very different from what it meant in *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. Instead of insisting that Egypt should therefore be considered part of the West, he saw it as straddling both East and West and communicating between both. Instead of insisting that Egypt entirely westernise itself, he also put emphasis on its Arab-Islamic history. This is a focus which appeared in later issues of the magazine too. For instance, in an article from May 1946 entitled “Two Revolutions”, he compared Spartacus’ uprising with the Zanj slave uprising of 9<sup>th</sup> century Iraq.<sup>94</sup> He noted that, whereas Europeans took literary inspiration from Spartacus (and other events from Greek, Roman and Biblical history), Egyptian writers of the time seldom engaged in depth with events of the Zanj revolution or any other Islamic history, except in passing references to unproblematic glorious conquerors. “It would be better to look to out [Arabic] history as a source of literary inspiration. It should be a part of our present life”, he said and continued to bemoan people who took all their examples of social justice from Europe.<sup>95</sup>

In this new stage of his literary production, he had stopped using Greece as an argument to westernise Egypt. Here, his engagement was much subtler, as outlined in the first long article in *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī*, ‘Arabic Literature Between Yesterday and Tomorrow’.<sup>96</sup> He still granted ‘the East’ some role in the creation of the ‘Greek mind’. However, the dynamics of this exchange became more equal. Here, it was the clash of two cultures that kindled the Greek mind: “The thing that there is no doubt about is that the Persian war thrust the Asian East together with Greek countries. This violent thrust of linking sparked the minds of the Greeks along with their hearts and their tastes, kindled their holy, intellectual fire and led to the blaze that filled the world with light and knowledge.”<sup>97</sup>

In a post-World War Two context, this idea that war led to the great spark of intellect is interesting. Unlike in previous works, in this new period Hussein saw the meeting of minds

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<sup>92</sup> Note how Athens and Greece still seem to be used interchangeably.

<sup>93</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 1:1 October 1945, 1.

<sup>94</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 2:8 May 1946, 553–73.

<sup>95</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 2:8 May 1946, 555.

<sup>96</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 1:1 October 1945, 4–27.

<sup>97</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 1:1 October 1945, 5.

coming from single moments of inspiration, not from long cultural ties. This new way of thinking made cultural exchange a much freer, more varied process that did not rely on political control or domination to transfer ideas. was is a process that allowed Egypt to be a conduit for many disparate strands and ideas.

This literary way of viewing Greece opened up a new way of using ancient literature. A “curtain has been pulled down” between ancient Greece and the modern world, Hussein argued. This meant that no culture could claim the ancient Greeks as their own by right, not even the modern Greeks. For “when the modern Greeks started their modern life they founded a literature for themselves. Even if it had connections to the old literature it was not a part or a continuation of it. Ancient Greek literature lives by itself, I do not want it to derive life from a living people ... rather it gets its life from the strong character that the ancient Greeks bestowed upon it.”<sup>98</sup>

Literature could be used by anyone. It would always retain its ancient Greek character but historical and geographical connection to ancient Greece alone did not give anyone the right to use it, nor did a historical detachment from Greece prohibit you. Hussein did not want to entirely reject the importance of past cultural contact between Greece and Egypt that dominated his earlier work but he seemed to be opening doors for freer engagements with Greece, and also back tracking a little from his earlier programmatic statements about Egypt’s connection to the West. It is within this model that Hussein’s translation of Gide’s *Oedipe* in 1946 should be placed. As I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, translating this version sent the message that *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a play that is open to different versions and imaginings.

This later period of Hussein’s work is significant because it seems to be largely detached from the historical influence of Greece on the Mediterranean region and focused on Greek literature in a purely ‘literary’ way.<sup>99</sup> As such, it appears to be the most ‘cosmopolitan’ expression Hussein makes about Greek literary heritage and, because of this, one that is least directly connected to Egypt. It is much more of a statement of global ownership. It is, however, detached from the difficult layers of politics that made his previous writings so troublesome but also rich.

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<sup>98</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī*, 1:1 October 1945, 9. Though he does admit that the French are the ones who have come closest to Greek literature because they have used it most.

<sup>99</sup> Though Taha Hussein does not seek to deny the historical influence of Greece on the Mediterranean region, rather to shift the focus.

### Colonised or Cosmopolitan?

And so, the population, scattered and wild and therefore inclined to war, became accustomed to rest and idleness through luxury. ... Agricola gave the sons of the chiefs a liberal education [*liberalibus artibus erudire*] ... so those who had recently rejected the Roman language, now desired its eloquence. They also began to honour our dress and many wore the 'toga'. Gradually, this led to allure of diverse vices: porticoes, baths, the elegant grace of banquets. This was called civilisation [*humanitas*] by the ignorant, when it was all a part of their slavery.

Tacitus, *Agricola*<sup>100</sup>

This often-cited chapter of Tacitus, an author whom Hussein studied whilst in Paris, is an early statement of the mechanisms of cultural imperialism operating in Britain under Roman control. This theme has been behind of much of this discussion of Taha Hussein's work and it is time to address it directly. The central question is this: how successful was Taha Hussein in claiming Greek culture and literature for Egypt? Through the Greeks and the tensions that their history in Egypt elicit, we can get to the heart of some broader issues about intellectuals in a colonised country to claiming ownership of a literature also claimed by their colonisers.

Among the many different positions and nuances, there are two poles from which scholars have looked at this question. To make these central differences clear I shall take the work of Peter Pormann and Shaden Tageldin as examples. Considering the place of the Greeks in Egypt, through Taha Hussein's work, I suggest a stance that brings the poles together.

Peter Pormann has discussed Hussein's cosmopolitan Hellenism at length, in a number of articles on Egyptian receptions of ancient Greek history more broadly.<sup>101</sup> His argument is that Hussein's work was a positive attempt to claim intellectual control over the Greek part of Egypt's history and to assert that the Egyptians had just as much right to Greek history as Europeans did. Pormann supports the project of Hussein (and other contemporaries) and although he accepts that his "investigations and aspirations might well appear somewhat naïve", he concludes that "in this writer's mind there is no doubt that [Hussein and others] were fundamentally right" about the cultural traffic across the Mediterranean.<sup>102</sup> He also

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<sup>100</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola* 1:21.

<sup>101</sup> Pormann, 'Classics and Islam'. Pormann, 'The Arab "Cultural Awakening (Nahḍa)", 1870-1950, and the Classical Tradition'. Pormann, 'Greek Thought, Modern Arabic Culture'.

<sup>102</sup> Pormann, 'Classics and Islam', 230.

supports Hussein's broader cultural aims and notes that "the shared Greek classical heritage to which Muslims, Christians, and Jews equally appealed throughout history, enabled them to partake in a discourse transcending country and creed."<sup>103</sup>

On the other side, Shaden Tageldin uses an idea of 'translational seduction' to argue that cultural imperialism is not something that is simply imposed on a colonised people. Rather, it is often the colonised themselves who are seduced into self-colonisation.<sup>104</sup>

Taking up Baudrillard's 1979 work *De la Seduction*, she notes that "the seducer's strategy... consists in creating the illusion that she is the object of seduction – without ever actually succumbing to object status – and in making the true object of seduction, the seduced, believe himself the seducer".<sup>105</sup> Tageldin wants to expand this to translation and colonial politics. Building also on Spivak, who talks about being seduced by translation, she sees the work of boom in translation of European works in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth century as an instance of Egyptians being seduced by these texts to gladly give up themselves to colonisation of the mind.<sup>106</sup>

For Tageldin, Baudrillard highlights the allure of the seduced being deceived to believe that they are the seducer. However, within this particular power-dynamic, she argues that such a thing cannot be possible. Egypt must always be the seduced and Europe the seducer. She, therefore, refuses Baudrillard's insistence on "seduction's infinite reversibility" and says that real seductions only happen on one side; the colonial side. "The real seducer is one whose illusions can call for backup". It is being fooled into thinking that you have power over the texts, and that you can be an equal partner in their reception, that, almost paradoxically, allows them to exert their power over you in ways you do not realise. In Tageldin's words, it is "a transformation of the disempowered into the delusory 'likeness' of the empowered". Or, as Tacitus would say, "this was called civilisation ... when it was all a part of their slavery."<sup>107</sup>

Tageldin does discuss Taha Hussein but does not focus on his work on the Greeks. However, it is clear how one could continue her model to include Hussein's Hellenism. Although Hussein might have thought that, as an Egyptian, he was able to control his reception

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<sup>103</sup> Pormann, 'Classics and Islam', 230–31.

<sup>104</sup> Shaden Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>105</sup> Tageldin, *Disarming Words*, 11. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) Translated by Brian Singer. First published in French as *De La Seduction* in 1979.

<sup>106</sup> Gayatri Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), 200–25.

<sup>107</sup> Tageldin, *Disarming Words*, esp. 1–32. Quotes from, 12–13, 14.

of Classical Greece, he was being deceived. The history that was coming to him was mediated by European sources and European education and so, via the Greeks, European ways of thinking came into Arabic writing, through the back door. This extension of Tageldin's work is a way to look at this work on the Greeks from a different angle to Pormann. It is also a model that can address the European sources of much of this knowledge and, for instance, Luc Barbulesco's assertion that Taha Hussein's programme for Classical Education, for instance, "owed little to Hellenistic inspiration, properly conceived, and almost everything to the contemporary French model."<sup>108</sup>

Pormann and Tageldin's opposing views, as they stand, are incompatible with one another. However, by thinking more carefully about the role of the Greeks and Greek culture we can, I propose, break down this binary opposition. For, the ancient Greeks and their historical relationship to Egypt, as portrayed in Taha Hussein's writing, are at once colonial and cosmopolitan in a way that both scholars could engage with.

Pormann's use of the Greeks and his historically grounded arguments about the nature of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean can complicate Tageldin's argument. In her discussion of Hussein she refers to his promotion of Latin and Greek as "ancient Western languages".<sup>109</sup> However, their designation as "Western" elides some of the complexity in Hussein's encouragement to Egyptians to learn these ancient languages. In Hussein's view, in order to get to a time before Latin and Greek were enlisted as part of colonial European culture, it was necessary to go back to the original languages and be able to use them for yourself, complicating this simple East-West dichotomy.

Conversely, Tageldin's approach also has an intervention to make in Pormann's work. In reality, the Greeks are not a totally neutral slate for an Egyptian to write their own story upon. Particularly in Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, there are ways that Greek and Latin were – in practice – tied into Europe and European colonialism in twentieth century Egypt.<sup>110</sup> However, more than that, Greek history itself contains power relationships that are difficult for an Egyptian to negotiate. The most obvious question was whether Alexander the Great heralded a period of cultural contact or cultural imperialism but there were certainly

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<sup>108</sup> Barbulesco, 'L'Itinéraire Hellénique de Tâhâ Husayn'. See also: Mahmoudi *Taha Husain's Education*.

<sup>109</sup> Tageldin, *Disarming Words*, 282.

<sup>110</sup> Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, 139–71; Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt*, 229–59. Here Reid discusses Lord Cromer's interest in the classics, which is a good example here of British colonial administrators tried to claim the Greeks and Romans for themselves.

others. Looking at Greece in Egypt, we cannot ignore the kinds of questions of power and domination that Tageldin raises.

Any attempt to construct Egyptian national history from the Greeks works in contradictory ways; this may help us bring back the doubleness of Baudrillard which Tageldin rejected. He argued that seduction must always work both ways. “There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if one has not been seduced.”<sup>111</sup> In Baudrillard’s seduction there is no way to tell who is being seduced and who seducing because both are doing both. It is for this reason that Narcissus is given as the great exemplar of seduction.<sup>112</sup> By the very nature of Narcissus’ encounter with his reflection, both Narcissus and the (putative) viewer are unclear about who is seducing and who is being seduced.

Hussein both exerted intellectual power over his material and had intellectual power exerted upon him. If this tension obtains for other instances of colonial and post-colonial translations in Egypt, in this case it is particularly obvious. As we have seen from Hussein’s works, Greece could be seen as a coloniser over Egypt, as an intrinsic part of Egypt, as intellectually influenced by Egypt in its early period, or simply as a pan-Mediterranean, cosmopolitan culture. Hussein invoked *all* of these possible identities for Greece in an ever-shifting relationship. This is what makes his overarching conception of the Greeks so hard for scholars to pin down. By having a view of Greece that accepts these contradictions, we can benefit from the work of both Tageldin and Pormann but not to let them cancel each other out. We can think about Greece in a way which straddles Europe and the Middle East and which can, from different angles, be construed as European, Eastern and cosmopolitan.

So, rather than attempting to call, for instance, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* Hussein’s fully developed view of this relationship, we should accept that the point is not to find an answer but that different answers can be found in different contexts. We can never give the definite answers a) “the Greeks are Eastern” b) “The Greeks are European” c) “The Greeks are cosmopolitan and belong to no-one”. Just as we can never say that translators in nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt exclusively a) influenced their power over the texts they translate or b) had power influenced over them by the texts. Both of these were true (and not true) at

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<sup>111</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 81.

<sup>112</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 67.

the same time and it is a product of the colonial cultural experience that we cannot ever pick one of them.

### Taha Hussein's *Oedipus The King*

It will not be surprising to learn that Hussein was an avid promoter of Greek drama nor that it was he who published the first Arabic translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*.<sup>113</sup> This translation of the play (and his subsequent translation of Gide's *Oedipe*) and the issues surrounding it encapsulate many of the issues raised this chapter. It serves as a metaphor for the complexities of his engagement with the Greeks as a whole.

Hussein saw theatre as the best way to introduce Greek literature to Egypt. In his introduction to his 1920 *Selections from Greek Drama* he explained his reasoning: he “didn’t see an art that was easier to understand, more gentle to touch, or more pleasant for the spirit than drama.”<sup>114</sup> This focus on acting and drama was consistent with his wider project to get Egyptians to revive and re-enact their ancient history. For this aim, drama was a rich medium. Here, and on the stage, a modern Egyptian could *become* Oedipus. The medium of performance, forced the writer, the performer and (to a degree) the audience to think about the relationship of the ancient Greek text to their contemporary reality. Drama, which lives in the moment it is enacted, was a genre that forced people to think about the relationship of the play to modern Egypt. This negotiation between the past and present was a central part of Hussein’s programme and throughout the 1920s he promoted Greek drama in Egypt. It was not until 1939 that he published a full-length translation of Oedipus itself, along with other plays by Sophocles in *From Greek Dramatic Literature: Sophocles*.<sup>115</sup>

The translation itself embodies some of the ambiguities of the use of Greek literature in Egypt in the twentieth century. Hussein certainly encouraged Egyptians to learn the ancient languages so they would not have to use European languages when looking at their own history. And Pierre Cachia notes that he “criticised Ahmad Lutfi ‘s-Sayyid because his

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<sup>113</sup> Farah Antun’s 1912 translation was never published.

<sup>114</sup> Husayn, *Selections from Greek Dramatic Poetry*, 10.

<sup>115</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Min al-Adab al-Tamthīlī al-Yūnānī: sūfūklīs* [From Greek Dramatic Literature: Sophocles], (Cairo: 1939). Citations from Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *al-Majmū‘a al-Kāmila li-Mu‘allafāt al-Duktūr Ṭāhā Husayn [The Complete Works of Dr Taha Hussein]*, vol. 15 (Bayrūt: al-Shirka al-‘Ālamīya li-l-Kitāb, 1980), 143–94.



translation of Aristotle was made via the French, and his own Greek translations are from the original.”<sup>116</sup>

Yet, as a good demonstration of how closely Greek literature was tied up with European languages, Hussein was not able entirely to dispense with the French for his translation of Oedipus and use only the Greek. Cachia, quoting an interview with Hussein, notes that “admits that he made use of French translations to check doubtful passages.”<sup>117</sup> Hussein might have been understating the reality and, by looking closely at text of his translation, it is possible to show that he relied on the French for more than just to check a few doubtful passages.

It is often easy to find out which version of a text someone is using for a translation by looking at the stage directions. Greek texts did not have stage directions so any directions that are present have necessarily been added and often differ considerably between texts. If we compare Hussein’s stage directions in the Arabic with texts available at the time it is quite simple to isolate the model as Paul Masqueray’s 1922 parallel text translation.<sup>118</sup> To take just one example of many, a point at the end of the play where Oedipus has blinded himself and his children come out to him, makes this clear. In Jebb’s 1887 English version of the play, for example, the stage directions signal the two girls’ entrance very simply: “CREON’S attendants lead in the children, ANTIGONE and ISMENE.”<sup>119</sup> Masqueray, in contrast is a little more flowery. He adds, at this point: “Antigone et Ismène, qu’un esclave sur un signe du Roi est allé chercher, s’approchent de l’aveugle: elles sont toutes jeunes.”<sup>120</sup> Taha Hussein’s Arabic directions follow Masqueray very closely, and he even kept in his flourish about the age of the children. Hussein’s text runs “Antigone and Ismene approach their father, a servant has come with them on Creon’s signal, and they are in the bloom of youth.”<sup>121</sup> Despite the minor difference in word order and the change of “aveugle” to “father” there can be little doubt that Masqueray was the source. Beyond the reference to the youth of the girls Hussein maintained

<sup>116</sup> Cachia, *Tāhā Husayn*, 185. Cachia cites a collection of Taha Hussein’s articles in the newspaper *al-Siyāsa* which was later published under the title *Ḥadīth al-Arbi‘ā’ [Wednesday Talk]*. The criticism appears in an article entitled ‘Aristotle’s *Ethics*’. Husayn, *Ḥadīth al-Arbi‘ā’ [Wednesday Talk]*(Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1989), vol. 3, 47-57. Criticism from 56.

<sup>117</sup> Cachia, *Tāhā Husayn*, 185.

<sup>118</sup> Sophocles and Paul Masqueray, *Sophocle: Ajax. Antigone. Oedipe-Roi. Électre.*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1922), 129–97.

<sup>119</sup> Sophocles and Richard C. Jebb, *The Plays and Fragments: Part 1, The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1883), 265.

<sup>120</sup> Masqueray *Sophocle*, 194.

<sup>121</sup> Husayn, *From Greek Dramatic Literature*, 192.

تدنو أنتيجونا وأسمينا من أبيهم. و قد جاء بهما خادم بإشارة من كريون. وهما في نضرة الشباب

*ishāra* for *signe* when it is not especially necessary to the scene. Every stage direction in Taha Hussein matches up in this way to Masqueray.

There are other strong suggestions that the French was Hussein's basic model, who might have consulted the Greek on some problematic parts, but this is harder to prove. Masqueray's text is itself a very close translation of Sophocles and so it is often very difficult to tell definitively whether Hussein was translating from the Greek into Arabic, with occasional reference to the French to clear up difficulties, or whether he was primarily relying on the French and only paying small attention to the Greek. The resulting Arabic text would be much the same in both case. Yet there are some features in Hussein's translation which point to a reliance on the French.

One clue to the fact that Hussein is primarily using the French is often the use of proper names. For instance, OT 525-6, the Greek simply says: "Why did it seem that the priest, persuaded by my words, spoke falsehoods?"<sup>122</sup> Yet both the French and the Arabic insert the name "Oedipus" specifically. The French says (instead of "why did it seem..." in the Greek) "what could have made Oedipus think that ..."<sup>123</sup> Taha Hussein in his Arabic followed the French, saying "What is it that encouraged Oedipus to think that..."<sup>124</sup>

Likewise, in line 637 Jocasta tells Oedipus and Creon to go back to their homes. In the Greek, she says "Why don't you go back to your estate and you, Creon, go back under [your] roofs?"<sup>125</sup> Masqueray, however, adds Oedipus' name as well as turning the clause into an order (instead of a rhetorical question). "Go back into the palace, Oedipus, and you, Creon, into your dwelling."<sup>126</sup> Hussein followed the French, both in adding the name of Oedipus and in turning the clause into an imperative: "Go back to your palace Oedipus and you, Creon, go back to your house."<sup>127</sup> It is also worth noting that throughout the text Hussein followed Masqueray in translating the Greek "οἴκους" as palace [*qaṣr*]. This is a legitimate translation of this Greek word which is literally the plural of house [*ergo* household *ergo* royal household *ergo* palace] but this is another regard in which the French and Arabic match very closely.

<sup>122</sup> του προς δ' ἐφάνθη, ταῖς ἐμαῖς γνώμαις ὅτι

πεισθεὶς ὁ μάντις τοὺς λόγους ψευδεῖς λέγει; OT 525–26

<sup>123</sup> Masqueray *Sophocle*, 159. "Qu'est-ce qui a pu faire croire a Oedipe que..."

<sup>124</sup> Husayn, *From Greek Dramatic Literature*, 162 "ما الذي طوع لأويديوس أن يظن أن..."

<sup>125</sup> OT 637 "οὐκ εἴ σύ τ' οἴκους σύ τε, Κρέων, κατὰ στέγας[;]"

<sup>126</sup> Masqueray, *Sophocle*, 164 "Rentre dans le palais, Oedipe, et toi, Creon, dans ta demeure."

<sup>127</sup> Husayn, *From Greek Dramatic Literature*, vol. 15, 166 "عد إلى قصرِكَ يا أويديوس , وعد أنت إلى دارِكَ يا كريون"

It could, in theory, be that Hussein and Masqueray were simply making similar choices of what to do with the tricky Greek text (very occasionally Hussein's text seems closer to the Greek text but these are heavily outweighed by counter-examples<sup>128</sup>). However, the repeated similarity between Hussein's translation and Masqueray's, along with the fact that he clearly took the stage directions from Masqueray, strongly suggests a much closer relationship to the French text than to the Greek.

Hussein's did make a number of his own decisions independent of both. For example, he simplified or glossed many of the Greek names, particularly divine names. This is particularly clear in the choral odes where, in the original text, complex periphrases are used for gods. For instance, OT 203 begins with "Lycian Lord" (Λυκεί' ἀναξ), which Hussein translated as simply Apollo [*Abūlūn*].<sup>129</sup> In the same vein, he translated *Dike* as justice [‘*adl*'] instead of leaving the Greek name to stand untranslated as Masqueray's version does.<sup>130</sup> Hussein, presumably, felt that the Arabic audience would not understand these more complex references to Greek mythology and languages and, instead of peppering the text with notes, translated them in a simpler way.<sup>131</sup>

To claim simply that Hussein was translating from the French, or somehow cheating, is to miss the point. His procedures in using a parallel text Greek-French edition to make his translation were an apt symbol for the reception of Greek literature in Egypt at the time. As his conversation with Cachia confirms, he saw himself as translating from Greek, with reference to the French. Essentially, he was using a French crib, which, although not strictly speaking *pure*, was different from just using a French text. He continued to promote the study of Greek and there is no reason to distrust the sincerity of his views about ancient Greece. What it does show us, as we have seen before, is how difficult it was to separate 'the Greek' at the time from 'the European', a task that Hussein took on to differing degrees during his career.

<sup>128</sup> OT 561 “μακροὶ παλαιοὶ τ’ ἂν μετρηθεῖεν χρόνοι” (A long, old time might be measured out [time being the subject]) vs. Masqueray (1922), 161 “on pourrait compter une longue suite d’annees” (You could count a long succession of years [‘years’ instead of ‘time’ + made into an object]) vs. Hussein (1980-85) vol. 15, 163.

“مضى علي ذلك زمن طويل” (A long time has passed on this [‘time’ not ‘years’ and ‘time’ is the subject]).

<sup>129</sup> Husayn, *From Greek Dramatic Literature*, 152.

<sup>130</sup> OT 274 cf. Husayn, *From Greek Dramatic Literature*, 154, vs. Masqueray *Sophocle*, 151.

<sup>131</sup> Though he does not always get them right. OT 661 mentions Helios who is a personification of the Sun. Confusing this with Apollo's close relationship to the sun in mythology, he translates Helios as Apollo in Husayn, *From Greek Dramatic Literature*, 167.

Whatever his methods, the important fact, which should not be understated, is that in 1939 Taha Hussein published a translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* in Arabic that was, for the most part, an accurate rendering of the Greek text (even if it was with the help of French). For the first time, Arabic speakers could buy a full edition of the play in their native language. It has remained a popular version and has appeared in at least 10 different editions, the most recent of which came out in 2007.<sup>132</sup> The text was used in mid-twentieth century Egypt for performance as well as for reading. In 1943, shortly after the opening of a University in Alexandria Hussein's translation was used to put on a production of the play in the College of Arts. George Abyad, who had been performing *Oedipus Tyrannos* since 1912, was the director and a student in the philosophy department called Mahmud Mursi played Oedipus.<sup>133</sup>

After the war, in 1946, Hussein also published a translation of André Gide's *Oedipe* into Arabic. The introductory dedication implies that Hussein decided to translate the text after hearing Gide recite the text to him. Suzanne Taha Hussein, in her account of her life with her husband Taha, also recounted the events of this reading, which took place during Gide's visit to Egypt.<sup>134</sup>

This translation of Gide, done less than 10 years after his translation of the Greek, was also an important step in Hussein's work. To translate a 'version' of Oedipus, as well as its original, advertises Oedipus as a text that should be adapted and experimented with. Hussein makes this clear in his introduction. In the second section, he discussed various different versions of Oedipus, starting with the fact that all three of the major Greek tragic poets (Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides) did their own versions of Oedipus, and continuing to Gide and Cocteau, passing by Seneca, Voltaire, Dryden and others along the way.<sup>135</sup>

The third section of Hussein's introduction deals in greater detail with these new versions.<sup>136</sup> Hussein noted that in Corneille and Voltaire's versions a love story was added "because the audiences that litterateurs were writing for wanted love in their drama." Gide and Cocteau, said Hussein, were also invested in 'renewing' [*tajdīd*] the story of Oedipus. Hussein

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<sup>132</sup> Ḥamdī 'Abd al-'Azīz, *al-Masraḥiyyāt al-Mutarjama Wa-L-Mu'arraba: Mu'jam Bībliyūrāfi [Plays Translated into Arabic: A Bibliography]* (Cairo: Miṣriyya, 2013), 623–24.

<sup>133</sup> Abyad, *Jūrj Abyad*, 311. Mursī later went on to become a famous cinema actor in Egypt. Taha Hussein's text was also used for Muhammad Sobhi's 1975 Oedipus, which falls outside the time-frame of this thesis.

<sup>134</sup> Hussein, *Avec Toi*, 180–82.

<sup>135</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Ūdīb [and] Thīsyūs* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li-l-Malayin, 1980), 14–18. First published: Cairo, 1946.

<sup>136</sup> Ḥusayn, *Ūdīb [and] Thīsyūs*, 18–32.

might have had a rather *classical* view of what Sophocles' play was about; namely "the harshness of fate on one hand and human freedom on the other." Also, he may have had a rather conservative view of what should be done when adapting the play; he thought that Corneille's adaptation had "ruined the story of Oedipus" by adding a love story to it. However, he did make an important statement by releasing a translation of Gide's renewed and reworked *Oedipe* so soon after he released a 'straight' version of Sophocles' play.<sup>137</sup> This reflects a new focus in his writing after the war, which constructed Greek texts in a primarily literary mould. It is a move towards seeing Greek plays not as tied to their history but as frameworks ready to be built upon by anyone, in any way they please.

It is worth looking at Gide's text briefly as only 3 years after this translation was published two radically different versions of Oedipus were published by Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ali Ahmed Bakathir. There are themes in both of these translations which can also be found in Gide's *Oedipe*.

Gide's adaptation follows the same essential course as Sophocles' original but he makes a number of narrative and thematic changes. The most striking narrative change is Gide's increased focus on Oedipus' children and their relationships to him and to each other. This has the effect of hinting at the further stories in the Oedipus cycle (Antigone, the civil war in which Eteocles and Polyneices kill each other, Oedipus at Colonus) and also draws attention to Oedipus' incest by constantly confronting us with its products.

There are, however, two thematic issues that this play explores which foreshadow the next two adaptations of Oedipus we will look at and, therefore, which are worth pulling out here.

The opening scene of the play does not start, as Sophocles' play does, with Oedipus lamenting the plague and the sorry state of his city, Thebes, but with him declaring his own happiness:

I have reached the summit of happiness. A child lost and found, without citizenship, without identity papers, I am especially happy to owe nothing to anybody except myself. Happiness was not given me; I conquered it.<sup>138</sup>

The chorus do not take kindly to his speech. "We declare that we are surprised and pained by the profession of such repellent individuality." They do not think it is right that he

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<sup>137</sup> Husayn, *Ūdīb [and] Thīsyūs*, 18–32. Quotes from 26, 20, 24.

<sup>138</sup> André Gide *Theseus and Oedipus* (trans. Andrew Brown) (London: Hesperus Press, 2002), 57. *Oedipe* originally published Paris 1942.

boast about his own happiness when the people are suffering. “It is fitting that a king should take an interest in the misfortunes of his people, even if he is not directly affected.” They go even further and say “Furthermore, we cannot but think that your happiness and our unhappiness are, in some mystic fashion, closely linked to one another.”<sup>139</sup>

Gide’s *Oedipe* opens with an interrogation of Oedipus’ kingship and the nature of his rule over the people. The assessment is far from positive. This opening raises up a question that runs through Gide adaptation: what kind of leader is Oedipus for Thebes? When put together with his *Thésée* we are forced to examine the role of a hero and the role of a king in a society.<sup>140</sup> This is a topic that is an important background to Tawfiq al-Hakim’s version of the play and which will be discussed in more length in the next chapter.

The second theme that Gide’s version focuses on and which is important in the Egyptian context is that of religion. Tiresias, in this play is forced to confront Oedipus’ disbelief in the gods. Oedipus’ atheism, which is present in Sophocles, is stressed here. What is more, Tiresias’ religion is distinctly Abrahamic. After Oedipus puts out his eyes Tiresias tells him “God did not expect this new infamy from you in payment for your first prize. But simply your repentance.”<sup>141</sup> His focus on repentance is not part of an Ancient Greek, polytheistic universe but it is indicative of a Christian system of morality, allowing for confession and repentance. This idea of forgiveness runs through many of Tiresias’ words. Shortly before this quote he also says “Come to God who is awaiting you! Your crime will be forgiven.”<sup>142</sup>

This new religiosity is not the focus of Gide’s play but it runs underneath much of it. As we shall see in the fifth chapter, the issue of religion in the play is one that Ali Ahmed Bakathir will explore in much more detail. In particular, Bakathir will look at how Islamic theology can be incorporated into the story of Oedipus, as Gide had with Christian ideas.

These later Egyptian versions may have taken some inspiration from Gide but they also looked to many other places. However, it is another reminder of Taha Hussein’s importance in the promotion of Greek literature in 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt that this translation of Gide’s adaptation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* can be used as a pivot from which to move our analysis to the two 1949 Egyptian adaptations of the play, which the next two chapters focus on.

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<sup>139</sup> Gide, *Theseus and Oedipus*, 58-9.

<sup>140</sup> For a short discussion of the questioning of heroism in *Thésée* in particular, see Andrew Brown’s introduction in Gide, *Thesues and Oedipus*.

<sup>141</sup> Gide, *Theseus and Oedipus*, 97.

<sup>142</sup> Gide, *Theseus and Oedipus*, 92.

## Conclusion

At the end of the first (1927) volume of his autobiography, *al-Ayyām* [*The Days*], Hussein addressed the final chapter to his young daughter:

I saw you [*ra'aytuki*] one day sitting on your father's lap as he was telling you the story of *Oedipus the King* and how he went out of his palace after blinding himself, not being able to walk. His daughter, Antigone, went up to him and led him away. I saw you, on that day listening to this story with pleasure at first. Then, little by little, your colour began to change and you began to frown. You began to sob deeply and fell upon your father with hugs and kisses ... Your mother and father understood, as did I,<sup>143</sup> that you were crying because you saw the king Oedipus blinded like you father. He could not see nor walk around by himself. You wept for your father as much as you wept for Oedipus.<sup>144</sup>

Note here how the tale, previously told by a blind narrator, takes a step aside and moves into a very 'dramatic' mode. The narrator "saw" the scene and *we* see that his daughter's "colour began to change". As he discusses Oedipus, the narrative becomes theatrical and Hussein moves in to the role of Oedipus, upsetting his daughter in the process. Thus, in a different way, we see Oedipus represented before an Egyptian audience

Hussein played the part of Oedipus in more than just his blindness. Throughout this chapter, we have seen Hussein's frequent attempts to understand his own heritage. He sought the historical origins of Egypt in a way that mirrors Oedipus' search for the secrets of his origin. Once Oedipus has found the truth, as we see in the scene that Hussein read aloud to his daughter, he does not find stability; he is left to wander blind outside the palace. Taha Hussein's does not find the same definitive answer as Oedipus but he is left in a position of confusion and, metaphorical, blindness.

This is also the position of Egyptians using Greek history to construct a national identity in a colonial context. There is an Oedipal element to the cross-cultural trade in a colonial context, even if it does not follow, of course, that *all* Egyptian engagements with Greece are Oedipal. *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a significant play in this broad framework of cross-cultural exchange as well as the specific reception of Greek texts in performance. In both of

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<sup>143</sup> The conceit in *al-Ayyām* is that the story is told by a disembodied narrator who looks down on the story from elsewhere.

<sup>144</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *al-Ayyām* [*The Days*], vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 147. Available in English in Taha Hussein, *An Egyptian Childhood* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997). trans. Paxton, 85.

these cases the Oedipus story acquires an emblematic position. As Goff and Simpson say in *Crossroads in the Black Aegean*, “the Theban plays, and especially Oedipus Tyrannus, are the basis of an influential model of cultural transmission that involves both aggression against and incestuous complicity in cultural institutions.”<sup>145</sup>

David Scott’s work on the figure of Toussaint Louverture in C.L.R. James’ *Black Jacobins* also engages with these ideas. He argues that Greek Tragedy – and Oedipus and Prometheus in particular – can show an embodiment of the seemingly unavoidable contradictions of anti-colonial enlightenment. “Oedipus and Prometheus are the two great signifiers of the incommensurable paradox of enlightenment.” For Scott, James’ characterisation of the historical Louverture was caught in a tragic bind. He wanted to use the same enlightenment thoughts that had enslaved him to free himself. Building also on the work of Christopher Rocco, he argues that the “recursive space opened up by *Oedipus Tyrannus* lifts [the debate] out of the dead-end quarrel between critical theory and post-structuralism and refocuses our attention away from the paralyzing either/ or – either embrace the project of modernity or reject it – into which the debate has inserted us.”<sup>146</sup>

This construction of Oedipus works through many of the same ideas that Taha Hussein was, not only using Tragedy to capture this double bind, but also using the Greeks and their historical relationship to Egypt. What is so important about Taha Hussein’s view of the Greeks is that he is offering a historical genealogy for Egypt which highlights these contradictions, instead of disguising them. And so, this blind writer who became one of modern Egypt’s most famous intellectuals, alternately, played the part of both Oedipus and the blind prophet Tiresias.

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<sup>145</sup> Goff and Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean*, 4.

<sup>146</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Quote from 173, 190. The whole book forms an interesting counterpoint to this work. The chapter ‘The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment’, 170–208 is particularly important. It is also informed by Christopher Rocco, ‘Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannos: The Tragedy of Enlightenment’, in *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 34–67.



### **Chapter Four: Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Oedipus The King***

Andrea: Unhappy the land that has no heroes.

...

Galileo: No. Unhappy the land where heroes are needed.

Brecht *Galileo*: Scene 13<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of 1949 the novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim published his *Oedipus the King* [*al-Malik Ūdīb*].<sup>2</sup> This was the first Egyptian adaptation of Sophocles' play and it drastically changed and altered the original. Al-Hakim intended to create what he saw as the first truly 'Egyptian' version of the play and, as such, this was an important moment in the history of the Egyptian Oedipus. It did not appear, however, from nowhere. The previous 50 years of performance and writing centred around *Oedipus Tyrannos* can inform many of the choices and problems that al-Hakim was faced with in writing this version of the play.<sup>3</sup>

Based on his own interpretation of the place of ancient Greek history in modern Egyptian culture, al-Hakim wanted to use *Oedipus Tyrannos* to develop a specifically Egyptian *form of theatre*. In doing so, he produced a book that stretched to 222 pages, including his adaptation of the play, together with several paratextual discussions of the significant changes that he had made to the original. Most importantly, he included a long and now well-known introduction, which set out his intentions in writing this adaptation. His goal was to produce something that could both appeal to an Egyptian audience and perhaps even become the foundation for an Arabic/Egyptian theatre tradition.

In addition to this 44-page introduction, he also closed the book with a translation of "the introduction to the French translation of this book by Monsieur Aloys de Marignac, the Swiss expert in Greek literature and in the tragedy of *Oedipus* in particular" and then his own nine-page response to Marignac.<sup>4</sup> The play itself should, therefore, not be viewed in isolation

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, John Willett, and Ralph Manheim, *Bertolt Brecht collected plays. Vol. 5, Part 1* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 98.

<sup>2</sup> For a note on the publication of the book see: *al-Risāla* February 1949, 184–85.

<sup>3</sup> First published 1949. I cite from Tawfiq al-Hakīm, *al-Malik Ūdīb [Oedipus the King]* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 203–22. Quote from 203 (footnote). The edition I will be citing in this chapter is the 1977 Maktabat al-Ādāb edition. Having briefly seen the 1949 edition I can confirm that it contains the play, the introduction, Aloys de Marignac's introduction to the French edition and Tawfiq al-Hakim's response to it but the page numbers may be slightly different.

but as a part of this larger book, the paratextual commentary being a crucial part of al-Hakim's larger theatrical project. In the play and in al-Hakim's discussions, the reader was asked to consider various questions: what should Egyptian theatre be? What role could ancient Greek theatre have in shaping modern Egyptian theatre? How could Egyptian theatre-practitioners engage with a specific ancient text in their own, modern context? By adding his own interpretation and the responses of others to the play, al-Hakim created a book which enacted the most important debates of early-mid-twentieth century Egyptian theatre.

When it comes to the text of al-Hakim's adaptation itself, he made important, often drastic, changes to the action. In its general structure, al-Hakim followed Sophocles' play but, as we shall see, his alterations to several important parts of the narrative were used to interrogate several key themes of the Oedipus story, such as fate, truth and politics. Tawfiq al-Hakim used the questions that previous versions of Oedipus asked about the role of a ruler and his relationship to his subjects to explore the political atmosphere at the time. This chapter argues that al-Hakim's play engages deliberately with the political issues of its period. This does not mean that specific characters in al-Hakim's play are direct ciphers for specific Egyptian political figures, but that it is deeply connected to the complex political events of the late 1940s.

Since al-Hakim was among the most important and best-known Egyptian playwrights of the twentieth century, a large amount of scholarly work has been devoted to this play. Much of the critical work is extremely negative in its appraisal of *Oedipus the King* and sees it as a failed experiment. Even al-Hakim himself toyed with the idea of his own failure when writing the play. Part of the reason this play is so interesting is that it is so conscious of the possibility of its failure. So, I propose a more complex engagement with this question. To write this off as simply as a failure is to ignore the issues at its core. As with much theatre of the twentieth century, it is not always clear in the case of al-Hakim whether to fail is, in fact, a failure.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although there is much to mention this chapter is particularly indebted to: in English Paul Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower: A Critical Study of Tawfiq al-Hakim* (London: Ithaca Press, 1987). Richard Long, *Tawfiq Al Hakim, Playwright of Egypt* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979). In Arabic Aḥmad 'Atmān, *The Classical Sources of Tawfiq al-Hakim's Theatre*. Muḥammad Mandūr, *Masrah Tawfiq al-Hakim [The Theatre of Tawfiq al-Hakim]* (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1966). In French Laurence Denooz, *Entre Orient et Occident: Rôles de l'Hellénisme et du Pharaonisme dans l'Oeuvre de Tawfik al-Hakim* (Genève: Droz, 2002).

### Oedipus 1912-1949

Since the first performance of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* in 1912 the Theban king continued to appear fairly regularly in Egyptian theatre and Egyptian culture more generally. We have also already seen in the previous chapter that Taha Hussein translated Oedipus into Arabic in the 1930s. In 1927 'Uthman Hamdi published a book called *In the World of Acting*. It included translations of works on theatre such as Cavendish Morton's *Art of Theatre Make-up* and selections from famous plays such as *Hamlet*. He also included a translation from the messenger speech in Oedipus and mentions that as a way for as many people to listen to it, he has made a record of it. "This monologue has been put out on Odeon records and I have thought in this manner because it is the most conducive way to spread the art of acting amongst all classes."<sup>6</sup>

The myth found its way into cultural magazines and journals in the interwar period too. For instance, a summary of Oedipus' story appeared in 1936 as part of Dirini Khashaba's series of tales from Greek myth in *al-Risāla* magazine.<sup>7</sup> Oedipus, as a character and a play, was becoming better and better known in this period. On the stage, there were a number of performances of the play in different languages. Touring French troupes, for instance, performed the play in 1929 and 1946. In 1945 a school troupe acted the play in Greek and the event was covered in the magazine *Images*. In the twentieth century Oedipus showed no sign of going away.<sup>8</sup>

However, up until 1949, the role of Oedipus in Arabic remained the primary (almost exclusive) domain of George Abyad and his troupe. It was a reasonably consistent part of their repertoire in Egypt and on tours around the Arabic-speaking world throughout the teens, twenties and thirties.<sup>9</sup> From 1917 George Abyad's wife, Dawlat Abyad began to play the part of Jocasta. In 1930, Abyad recorded scenes from *Oedipus the King*, *Louis XI*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* onto discs.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 'Uthmān Ḥamdī, *ft' Ālam al-Tamthīl [In the World of Acting]* (Cairo: Dār al-Sa'āda, 1927), 57–58. Quote from 58.

<sup>7</sup> *al-Risāla*, 8 June, 1936, 950–51; 15 June, 1936, 994–95.

<sup>8</sup> For French performances: *La Reforme Illustrée 1925-1950* [Anniversary Edition]. *3eme Partie: Les Spectacles de 1925-1950*, 145, 151. For Greek: *Images* 4 November, 1945, 12. It is unclear if this was ancient or modern Greek.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance: *al-Akhbār* 19 January, 1921, *al-Muqattam* 20 January, 1921 (STMM vol. 10, 49–50), *al-Ahrām* 23 September, 1922 (STMM vol. 11, 258). Abyād, *Jūrj Abyād*, 226, 248, 281 (performed in French) etc.

<sup>10</sup> Abyād, *Jūrj Abyād* 205, 266. Su'ād Abyād says that these recordings are the first time recordings of an Arabic actor had been released. Perhaps she is not counting Ḥamdī's recordings as he is not an

The 1940s brought further engagements with Oedipus to the public. In 1939, after training in France, the director Futuh Nashati [1901-1970] returned to Egypt. So, in 1940, as head of the national theatre troupe, he began their sixth season on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October with a performance of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, starring George Abyad. In his published memoirs, Nashati, reproduces some of the reviews of the play.<sup>11</sup>

The first review by al-Suwadi notes in *al-Balāgh* the imposing set design, saying he used “the whole stage of the Opera in the large *mise-en-scene*.” One particularly noteworthy point of the staging seems to have been the impact of the dying people of Thebes who open the play, which is mentioned in al-Suwadi’s review. When Ghobrial Wahba recalls the performance in a review of another version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in 1975, the primary thing he remembers is “Theban citizens carrying on stretchers, the corpses of those who died; and they were weeping, crying and pleading with their king Oedipus, to relieve the plague that invested the city.”<sup>12</sup> As I argued in chapter two, the suffering of the citizens of Thebes and their appeals to their ruler were a key thematic aspect of Abyad’s version of Oedipus; so the fact that this was emphasised by Nashati and that so many reviewers picked up on this part of the production is extremely important.

Abyad’s longevity in the role and the famous productions of the play in the earlier years of the twentieth century were also major topics of discussion in the reviews. Sulayman Naguib, who was head of the Opera at the time, and who saw the dress rehearsal, wrote in *al-Ahrām*. “I saw Ustaz Abyad pacing and leaping and it brought me back to the days of [my] youth when we used to watch him in the role from the highest rows of the Opera House and there was not an empty seat in the house.” Al-Suwadi said that “discussion of Abyad is not possible except [in the unlikely event] that there was, in Egypt, some citizen who was ignorant of the fact that Abyad climbed to the peak of glory on Oedipus’ ladder [‘*alā sullam Ūdīb*] years before the youth of this generation were born.” An article in *al-Sabāḥ* from 8<sup>th</sup> November 1940 said “Thirty years have passed on the story of Oedipus [*riwāyat Ūdīb*] and the shouts

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actor or perhaps she was unaware of them. The magazine *Images* made the same mistake in an article entitled ‘Les Premiers Disques Arabes de Théâtre: L’Hereuse Idée de Maître Acteur Georges Abiad’ 1 June, 1930, 15. Frédéric Lagrange kindly passed on to me the 1931 Odeon catalogue which advertises both Abyad’s and Hamdi’s recordings.

<sup>11</sup> Futūḥ Nashātī, *Khamsūn ‘Ām fī Khadmat al-Masrah [Fifty Years in the Service of the Theatre]*, vol. 1 (Cairo: GEBO, 1973), 155–56. See also Samīr ‘Awad, *Masrah Hadīqat al-Azbakiyya [The Ezbekiyya Garden Theatre]* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Masrah, 1983), 144.

<sup>12</sup> Nashātī, *Fifty Years*, vol. 1, 156-7. Ghobrial Wahba’s article originally appeared in *al-Cinema wa-l-Masrah* magazine in July 1975. Translation from Ghobrial Wahba, *Hellenic Drama in Performance* (Cairo: The Cultural Section of the Greek Embassy, 1995), 23–26.

that have been raised to congratulate Abyad since the first night still resound through the Opera and, alongside them, new shouts grow to support and assist [the first ones].”<sup>13</sup>

In Abyad’s *Oedipus the King* in the first half of the twentieth century, Egyptians could say that they had their own Oedipus. Tawfiq al-Hakim himself acknowledged the influence of George Abyad’s performances on his developing tastes. He wrote in his autobiography, *Sijn al-‘Umr* [The Prison of Life] that “I, like many other lovers of art besides me, had great admiration for George Abyad. I used to memorise whole pages from *Othello*, *Oedipus* and *Louis XI* and recite them in his style with other enthusiasts from amongst my classmates in my free time.”<sup>14</sup>

By the 1940s reviewers were no longer saying, as they did in 1912, that the Egyptian Oedipus had to catch up with the European. They were more confident in the pedigree of their own version of Oedipus. In fact, in February 1946, when Taha Hussein reviewed the French production of Oedipus fronted by Jean Hervé, he was not complimentary. It was the Comédie Française’s actors who were lacking, not Egyptians. “I do not know if Monsieur Jean Hervé in the role of Oedipus was acting Sophocles’ comedy or his tragedy. With all that the movements he made and the words he uttered which shook the walls of the Royal Opera house the only thing that it elicited was laughter.” Hussein also complained about the strange anachronisms such as Christian prayers and the decision to make Oedipus’ palace Pharaonic in style. Perhaps this was meant to make the play relatable to an Egyptian audience, who they assumed would not be familiar with Greek myth. However, Hussein saw it as a simple historical error. Overall, his conclusion was simple: “The play did not succeed.”<sup>15</sup>

### Oedipus 1949

1949 was a surprisingly fertile year for Oedipus in Egypt. In March this year George Abyad played the role for the last time on the stage of the Opera House. Sulayman Naguib, published an article *al-Ahrām* on the 1<sup>st</sup> March talking about the background of George Abyad’s first performance of the play in 1912 and calling on the audience to see him perform this “eternal play” for the first time in 11 years.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nashāfī, *Fifty Years*, 158–59.

<sup>14</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakīm, *Sijn al-‘Umr* [The Prison of Life] in Tawfiq al-Hakīm, *al-Mu‘allaqāt al-Kāmila* [The Complete Works], vol. 3 (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1996), 625–89. Quote from 655.

<sup>15</sup> *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* vol. 2 issue 5, February 1946, 154–55.

<sup>16</sup> Sulaymān al-Najīb article in *al-Ahrām*, 1 March, 1949, 7 gives the upcoming dates of performance as the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> March. *Al-Sijil al-Thaqāfī* 1949 (Cairo: Mustafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlāduhu,

As well as the reprise of the classic by this stalwart of Sophocles' play in Egypt, Jean Cocteau was also on tour in Egypt from mid-March, performing (amongst other things) his version of Oedipus, *La Machine Infernale*. In his published diary of this tour, *Maalesh*, Cocteau describes his trip around Egypt with Jean Marais' company, who were acting his plays. He toured around Cairo and Alexandria, meeting several Egyptians, including Taha Hussein who greatly impressed the French playwright.<sup>17</sup> Cocteau described the audience reactions to his plays, admitting that he often found it hard to interpret the feelings of Egyptian spectators. When he performed his adaptation of Oedipus in Cairo on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April, it had a very successful matinee but when it came to the evening performance Cocteau complained about the audience's ignorance of the Oedipus story, saying that "our audience in the evening was completely different and they did not seem to have much of an idea of the story of Oedipus."<sup>18</sup> He was presumably unaware that just a month earlier there had been a performance of Oedipus in Arabic at the Opera House and his assumption that the audience did not know a lot about the story of Oedipus was not necessarily well-founded.

However, it was not just familiar names from Egypt's past theatrical tradition or foreign playwrights who were part of the story of Oedipus in 1949. Later in the year, Yemeni-Egyptian playwright Ali Ahmed Bakathir published his own adaptation of the play, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*. This adaptation, which is the subject of the next chapter, like many of Bakathir's other plays, had a strong basis in Islamic thought.

So, unlike George Abyad's 1912 Oedipus, al-Hakim's own 1949 Oedipus emerged in an Egyptian cultural milieu which had been experimenting with Oedipus on different levels for 50 years and was still actively doing so. His was the first Oedipus to appear in this year. In it he took the myth further than any previous Egyptian versions had and into different places too. The adaptation was the result of four years of reading, work and thought about how to 'translate' this ancient tragedy to the Egyptian stage.<sup>19</sup> He was not only concerned with writing a new version of this one play but also with creating a comprehensive model for Arabic drama, based on a model theorised from the study of Greek tragedy. In his experiment, he wanted to move beyond one of the foundational moments in Egyptian theatre history, George Abyad's *Oedipus*, to arrive at a new stage. For al-Hakim, as it had been earlier in the twentieth century,

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1950), 437 gives a performance date on the 8th March. I was, in fact, the first performance by Abyad of the play for nine years (since 1940).

<sup>17</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Maalesh: Journal d'une Tournée de Théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 53–54.

<sup>18</sup> "Tout autre est notre public du soir qui ne semble pas avoir de grandes lumières sur l'histoire d'Édipe." Cocteau, *Maalesh*, 96.

<sup>19</sup> al-Hakim *Oedipus the King*, 219.

translation was key to the formation of a theatrical tradition. He did not want to use translation in the unregulated manner of the early twentieth century. He wanted to plan and think meticulously about the best way he could adapt *Oedipus Tyrannos* to form a new dramatic tradition:

We have all seen, on the Arabic stage, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which has been acted for more than a third of a century. However, simply transposing [*naql*] Greek dramatic literature to the Arabic language does not take us towards the foundation [*iqrār*] of an Arabic dramatic literature. Just as simply transposing [*naql*] Greek philosophy did not take us toward the creation of an Arabic or Islamic Philosophy. Translation [*tarjama*] is only a tool [*āla*] which should carry us to a further goal. This goal is drawing from the spring then swallowing it, digesting it and acting it out [*tamthīluhu*]. Then we can produce it to the people again, dyed with the colour of our thought, imprinted with the stamp of our beliefs. This is what the Arabic philosophers did when they dealt with the classic works of Plato and Aristotle.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the cultural producers featured in the first chapters of this thesis, al-Hakim sought to draw a line to separate translation and artistic production. For him translation was a foundation on which to build 'creation'. It allowed playwrights to learn the skills and tropes of theatre which they could then use in their own work. However, he would not have argued, as this thesis has, that translation can be an important kind of creation, but rather that it is a prelude to it. He did not see translated plays as engaging directly in the formation and reformation of an Egyptian theatrical tradition or as being an intrinsic part of it.

He was very much building on the work of people like Muhammad Taymur that we saw in chapter two. Like Taymur in the early twentieth century, al-Hakim subscribed to a theory of literature that separated its production into distinct phases. Translation, followed by adaptation (by which he means taking the plot and structure of another work and making your own changes), was merely a step that one must go through to get to a higher level. In *The Prison of Life*, talking about Egyptian theatre in the 1920s, he said that "adaptation [*al-iqtibās*] served Egyptian theatre in a praiseworthy way in its first stage". He described it as a "necessary step [*khatwa lā budd minha*], in any case, in writing for the Egyptian and Arabic stage" but not as something especially worthwhile in its own right.<sup>21</sup> This is a model which al-Hakim did not only apply to early twentieth century Egyptian theatre but to theatre and cultural production more generally. Shakespeare, he argued, did the same thing, copying other writers at the beginning of his career as the Egyptian playwrights copied Europeans. In his collection of

<sup>20</sup> al-Hakīm *Oedipus the King*, 31–32.

<sup>21</sup> al-Hakīm *Prison of Life* in al-Hakim, *The Complete Works* vol. 3, 672.

essays called *Fann al-Adab* [*The Art of Literature*] he quoted G.B. Harrison on Shakespeare to support his argument. In al-Hakim's summary, Harrison said "Shakespeare in the beginning of his career used to imitate [*yuqallid*] the dominant style among the theatrical writers of his time, to such an extent that some critics – subsequently – question: was he really the author of the first plays attributed to him?"<sup>22</sup>

It is only after this stage of imitation that one can write 'original' works. He also applied this more generally to the course of a 'national literature'. For him, culture must be built upon solid historical foundations; if it was not built on this heritage then it was, somehow, artistically hollow. To prove this, he took the example of Jazz in America. "America tried to take a short cut in the art of music, and it came up with this type of black music called Jazz but it failed to persuade the cultural world to revere this kind of music, which had no origin or line of descent which could be honoured."<sup>23</sup>

This conservative view of cultural production and 'national culture' left al-Hakim with a problem in the Egyptian theatre. As he was composing his *Oedipus The King*, he saw an Egyptian theatre still in its early stages, without a long heritage and still in the stage of trying to move beyond simple translations. He began his introduction with a lament: "Dramatic Literature is a door that has only been opened to the Arabic language in the current age." Al-Hakim needed to come up with a solution to this problem he had set himself.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Tawfīq al-Hakīm, *Fann al-Adab* [*The Art of Literature*] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, n.d.), 162–64. Quote from 162. The quote is originally from G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1963), 117: "at first Shakespeare imitated the common style and mannerisms so closely that some critics argue hotly whether he was indeed the sole author of some of the early plays attributed to him in the First Folio." There are more nuances to al-Hakīm's view than this summary could suggest at first glance. Although he does think that translation and imitation should be used as steps towards a further goal, he does not think translation and adaptation are without creativity entirely. In *Prison of Life* [*The Complete Works* vol. 3, 672] he says that Egyptian adaptations especially, because of the large changes they needed to make for the local audience, were at least "half-creation" [*niṣf ta'liṣ*] (I follow Pierre Cachia in my translation). Likewise, he notes a vogue in European theatre for adaptation, which slightly contradicts his view that it is just a stepping stone towards "creation". He is not as programmatic as other scholars, such as Adnan Wazzan, who says in *Oedipus Rex in Arabic and Greek Legacy: a Critique* (London: University & Akademia Publications, 1987), 49: "Generally speaking the appearance of Arabic literature went through three stages 1) Translation and Interpretation 2) Imitation 3) Original Creation."

<sup>23</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 11.



### Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Oedipus the King* and the Greeks

To solve this problem and to form this genre of theatre in Egypt al-Hakim decided that “the writer of these lines ought to begin at the beginning and go back to the source.” The source that could give his new Egyptian theatre genuine roots was, for al-Hakim, Greek drama. It was the most esteemed and respected dramatic tradition there was and something that could form the basis of a great tradition. He found corroboration of this view in the time he spent studying in Paris, recalling that “they said: If you are serious go back to the Greeks! Go back to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes.”<sup>25</sup>

Following on from Taha Hussein's work in the 20s and 30s, al-Hakim could use the Greeks to his advantage. A comparison between al-Hakim's approach in 1949 and al-Bustani's in 1904 shows how important Taha Hussein's work on the Greeks was for Egyptian intellectuals. Al-Bustani barely mentioned the cultural ties between Arabs or Egyptians and Greek history, using Homer as a neutral, but detached, historical epic which he could use and adapt for his current purposes. If he used it to get back to early Arabic poetry, this was not because of any shared cultural contact between the two. Al-Hakim, on the other hand, explicitly wanted to make these historical connections. In his introduction to *Oedipus* he stressed the exchange between Greek and Arabic philosophy and called for the same thing to happen in literature:

O Arabic Literature, there have, since ancient times, been links and close ties between you and Greek thought. You have looked into it and taken the sciences and philosophy that it has but you have turned your face away from the poetry that it has! How long will this split continue? When will there be a reconciliation between you and Greek poetry? Look into it a little, allow translation [*naql*] and research for maybe you might find in it something that adds to your heritage [*yad'am turāthak*] and enhances your inheritance to future generations.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Hakim, in his *Oedipus the King*, is trying to use the Greeks as more than just a neutral base from which to build a dramatic tradition. By going back to the Greek originals, he endeavoured to construct a genealogy for Egyptian theatre that grounded it in a long tradition. What is more, it was a history that was not just European. He wanted something that, although based on similar foundations to modern European theatre, was its own genre with its own features and style. It was through Greece, not through Europe, that Egyptians could create their own theatre. “Europe inherited this [dramatic] literature from the Greeks, they researched

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<sup>25</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 15.

it and studied it, and they built on its foundation and they wove [something new].” Al-Hakim argued that the Egyptians should now do the same for themselves.<sup>27</sup>

For al-Hakim, an Arabic adaptor or audience may have even had a superior engagement with Greek tragedy to the European adaptor or audience. As Hussein, had shown in the previous decades, both could be said to share in Greek history. Now, al-Hakim was arguing that the Arabic audience had a religious sensibility which Europeans did not have and which brought them closer to that of the ancient Greeks:

“I did not look at [Greek drama] from the point of view of a French or European researcher but of an Arabic, Eastern researcher [*bāḥith ‘Arabī sharqī*]. The two points of view are completely different ... Despite my European clothes, in which I went to the Comédie Française to see Albert Lambert act in Sophocles’ Oedipus, and despite that French spirit which emanated [in the production] from the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, something in the depths of my soul was bringing me near to the spirit of “Tragedy” as the Greeks felt it... That is, it springs from “religious feelings”. The whole essence of “Tragedy” is that it is a struggle – hidden or evident – between human beings and a divine power that controls creation: the struggle of human beings with something other than a human, something above the human. That true basis of “Tragedy” in my view, is man’s feeling that he is not alone in existence. This is what I mean by the phrase “religious feelings”.<sup>28</sup>

After Voltaire, he argued, European drama lost any religious feelings it might have had in the past. “With the extinguishing of these religious feelings, there is no hope, in my opinion, of making “Tragedy” and perhaps this is the reason for the death of “Tragedy” in our current age ... There is no thinker today, in the Western world, who truly believes in a god other than the human being himself.”<sup>29</sup>

Al-Hakim’s adaptation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* was created explicitly to give Egyptian theatre an authentic cultural grounding and, therefore, move it to a higher level of literature. The way that al-Hakim does this is to invoke Classicism and the history of the Greeks. Thus, in one move he can give Egyptian theatre pedigree and, by stressing the spirituality of the Greeks and the Egyptians, managed to paint Egypt and the Arab world as the true heirs of

<sup>27</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 33–34.

<sup>29</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King* 37–38. Aloys de Marignac, *Les Imitations Françaises de l’Œdipe-Roi de Sophocle* (Cairo: El-Eitemad [n.d.]), 15 does not go as far as to say that the West has no religion but he does say that “Depuis la Renaissance à Paris le théâtre est devenu profane; il s’interdit la représentation de quoi que ce soit qui ait trait à la religion des Français et ne voit dans la mythologie grecque que poésie et littérature.” For him French tragedy is not religious (though he makes no comment on the French people in general). Like al-Hakim, he thinks that French theatre cannot deal with the religious aspects of Sophocles’ play. See esp.: conclusion 133–45

Greek tragedy. Unlike Taha Hussein, who used the Greeks to unite the “Eastern” and “Western” worlds, al-Hakim used them to push the two asunder.

### Tawfiq al-Hakim and the Greeks

Although al-Hakim was using these ideas to justify his Oedipus, neither the Greeks nor al-Hakim’s view about the spirituality of the East and the materialism of the West were new ideas to him in 1949. The distinction between ‘Spiritual East’ and ‘Materialist West’ on grounds of spirituality is something that dominated many of his writings and has been much discussed. The key texts are his two novels the 1933 *Return of the Spirit* [‘*Awdat al-Rūh*’] and the 1938 *Bird from the East* [‘*Usfūr min al-Sharq*’].

This dichotomy that he constructed has been seen as simplistic and criticised by a number of people. The critic Louis Awad noted, in a tongue in cheek comment in private correspondence, that after the publication of his first novel al-Hakim “spen[t] the following twenty years making money by telling compatriots how spiritualistic the East is, and how materialistic the West is.”<sup>30</sup> Rasheed El-Enany argued that his views were so contradictory that he could not really have believed all of them but used the spiritualism of the East as a way to give Egyptians pride in their fight against European colonialism. The construction of this dichotomy in anti-colonial struggle has also been discussed by Partha Chatterjee, whose work offers a productive way to read al-Hakim.<sup>31</sup>

As we saw with Taha Hussein, al-Hakim’s ideas about the Greeks can form a useful way to interrogate his broader ideas further, but one that is often ignored. El-Enany, for instance, says that al-Hakim “fathered Arabic Drama through the emulation of Western models” adding that he “felt ... at home with Greek mythology and its reworkings in Western literature”<sup>32</sup> but El-Enany’s construction of Greek tragedy as a Western model does not help to examine the nuances of al-Hakim’s views. Denooz’s study of the classical influences in al-

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<sup>30</sup> Egypt: Awad, Lewis; 25/08/1952; Franklin Book Programs Records, Box 92, Folder 10; Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, 65. The Franklin book programme was a project to spread American culture in the Middle East and Awad was asked to send them a short summary of the state of the publishing trade and literary life in Egypt at the beginning of the 1950s.

<sup>31</sup> Rasheed el-Enany, ‘Tawfiq Al-Hakīm and the West: A New Assessment of the Relationship’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 2 (2000): 165–75. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). See e.g. 119–21.

<sup>32</sup> el-Enany, ‘Tawfiq al-Hakim and the West’, 173.

Hakim's work is rare in its detailed focus on the split between the East and West and how classical drama can play into it.<sup>33</sup>

To understand what al-Hakim is trying to do in his *Oedipus the King* we must go back to an earlier play: *The People of the Cave* [*Ahl al-Kahf*]. Al-Hakim said, in the introduction to *Oedipus the King*, that this 1933 play was the first attempt to "introduce the element of 'Tragedy' to the Arabic Islamic context, tragedy in its ancient Greek sense which I have preserved: the struggle between man and a hidden power above man".<sup>34</sup> The plot was based on the Quranic story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, seven Christians who retreat to a cave to avoid persecution and end up sleeping for 300 years. Al-Hakim's narrative showed what happens after they awake and return to the (now Christian) town they had fled. Taha Hussein reviewed the newly published text in *al-Risāla* of 15 May, 1933, citing it as a positive example of cultural cross pollination. He predicted that the author had a bright future ahead of him.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Hakim must have been thrilled to have such a positive review from a prominent critic such as Hussein. In the next issue of the magazine al-Hakim decided to keep the conversation going, engaging Hussein not on the content of his play but on another favourite topic of his: ancient Greece.<sup>36</sup>

Al-Hakim's response to Hussein was complex and at times seemingly contradictory but it shows important steps in the formation of his conception of the Greeks and their relationship to modern Egypt. He began the article by recounting a story from his time living in Paris. In Montparnasse he was trying to explain to his friends the difference between the Greeks and the (ancient) Egyptians. To demonstrate his view, al-Hakim took the example of statues, pointing out that Greek statues are naked, whereas Egyptian ones are clothed, arguing that this demonstrated the difference between the two cultures:

In this small observation are wrapped up all of the differences [between the two]. For the Egyptians everything is covered and hidden, whereas for the Greeks it is naked. Everything in Egypt is hidden like the spirit [*al-rūḥ*], and in Greece everything is naked like materiality [*al-mādda*]. Everything for the Egyptians is covered like the soul [*al-nafs*] and everything for the Greeks is clear [*jalī*] like logic [*al-mantiq*]. In Egypt, there is spirit and soul [*al-rūḥ wa-l-nafs*] and in Greece, materiality and intellect [*al-mādda wa-l-'aql*].<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Denooz, *Entre Orient et Occident*, 189–405.

<sup>34</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> For a summary of reactions to the play see Ramsīs 'Awaḍ *Mādhā Qālū 'An Ahl al-Kahf* [What They Said About the People of the Cave] [henceforth: MQAAK] (Cairo: GEBO, 1986). His exchange with Taha Hussein is covered 11–47.

<sup>36</sup> *al-Risāla* 1 June, 1933, 5–8.

<sup>37</sup> *al-Risāla*, 1 June, 1933, 5.

After going through descriptions of other civilisations - the Indians are based on spirit like the Egyptians, whereas the Arabs are based on materiality like the Greeks – the article went on to consider what *modern* Egyptian culture should be. It no longer needed to be merely spiritual like ancient Egyptian culture, he argued, but could be a mix of both the spirit and materiality:

[This would be] an amazing encounter: [ancient] Egypt and the Arabs as two faces of [the same] dirham, two elements of [the same] existence. What a great literature would emerge from this cross-pollination [*talqīh*]. I believe in what I am saying Doctor [Hussein]. I hope for this fate for modern Egyptian literature: a marriage between spirit and materiality [*al-rūh wa-l-mādda*]...<sup>38</sup>

By combining ancient Egyptian spirituality with the materiality of the Arabs they could create a wonderful composite.

The next section of the article takes a surprising turn as al-Hakim goes back on the argument with which he started to say that one such combination of spirit and materiality has existed before, in the Greeks. This move, as he admitted himself, was a retraction of his earlier statement that the Greeks were a culture of pure materiality. His ideas seem to have been changing and reforming as he wrote the article. To justify this change, he blamed his earlier self for being too influenced by the words of [Hippolyte] Taine in formulating that view and only using intellect to assess the Greeks. “Taine is a captivating intellect [*‘aql khallāb*] but he is [just] an intellect.” Al-Hakim argued that we needed more than simply intellectual thought to assess the Greeks. “What led me to the truth was the heart, was standing in front of the façade of the Parthenon in long contemplation ... [I realised that] [the Greeks] *did* feel something else other than apparent materiality [*al-mādda al-zāhira*].” The beauty of the Parthenon eventually convinced him that the Greeks had a spiritual side; he just needed to think about the Greeks on a level that transcended (or at least evaded) the intellect.

His article recruited Nietzsche’s distinction between the Dionysiac (which he associates with ‘spirit’) and Apolline (which he associates with ‘materiality’ and ‘intellect’) to explain his new view. Greek culture was, in fact, at its best, a fusion of the Dionysiac element from the East and the Apolline from the North, although, as Nietzsche says, it was the Apolline intellect that eventually triumphed in Greece. At the very end, he appealed to Taha Hussein to

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<sup>38</sup> *al-Risāla*, 1 June, 1933, 7.

help construct an Egyptian culture that could also blend these two elements, as the Greeks had done.<sup>39</sup>

Between 1933 and 1949 his explanation of Greek culture and its relationship to Egyptian culture shifted somewhat.<sup>40</sup> Owing much to the work of Hussein, though departing from him in several ways, al-Hakim began to formulate his own view of the place of ancient Greek in modern Egypt. By the late 1940s he had started to see ancient Greek theatre as the best way to form a new Egyptian theatrical tradition.

It could be argued that the introduction to his *Oedipus the King* proposes a simpler East-West dichotomy than his complex construction of hybrid cultures expounded in 1933. It is also possible to argue that this mix of intellect and spirituality is implicit in his arguments in the introduction to *Oedipus this King*. The most important thing we should note about this 1949 play was his view that the intellect alone was not enough to interpret ancient Greek tragedy. He, whether as an ‘Easterner’ or an ‘Egyptian’, had access to something in the plays that Westerners, who think only with their minds, did not: the spiritual elements of the plays. He expressed this concept sometimes in terms of “religious feeling”, sometimes as “spirituality” more broadly but it is always through this that he constructs his idea of Greece.<sup>41</sup>

### Performance and the Theatre of the Mind

*Ahl al-Kahf* is a necessary part of the background to *Oedipus the King* for other reasons too, as Taha Hussein’s 1933 review of the play makes clear. The review started full of praise for the book. “This story is an amazing event [*ḥādith dhū khaṭar*], which chronicles a new age [*yu’arrikh ... ‘asran jadīdan*] in Arabic literature,” he enthused. However, despite this positive verdict, Hussein closed the review with two criticisms. The first was that there were a few linguistic errors that needed to be fixed. The second proved to be prophetic. Hussein said that

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<sup>39</sup> *al-Risāla*, 1 June, 1933, 8. Taha Hussein writes a response in the next issue 15 June, 1933, 5–9. In it, amongst other things, he counsels al-Hakim to consider the third element to Egyptian culture (beyond Arabic and ancient Egyptian) and that is “the foreign” [*al-ajnabī*], 9. He notes an important part of the Egyptian character is incorporation and mediation of other cultures, again using history to bring together rather than separate.

<sup>40</sup> In the intervening period he also made other plays based on ancient Greek themes such as an adaptation of Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazousae* called *Praksa* in 1939 and a version of *Pygmalion* in 1942.

<sup>41</sup> al-Hakim’s use of Greek and Pharaonic history, and particularly his interest in *rūḥ* and *māda* or ‘*aql* in this context is discussed at length in Denoos, *Entre Orient et Occident*, 192–390. Esp. 212–17, 271–330.

“the story is suited to be read and not to be acted [*khalīqa ‘an tuqra ‘lā ‘an tumaththal*]” and argued that it would not fare as well in front of an audience as it did as a written text.<sup>42</sup>

When the newly formed National Theatre Troupe was ready to perform its first play in 1935, they selected *Ahl al-Kahf*. It must have seemed the perfect choice - a play, written in Arabic by an Egyptian, which had caused a splash when published. The new, serious Egyptian theatre troupe had a new, serious play to perform. Yet, when it was put on stage, Hussein’s prediction was correct: the audience did not respond well. The performance was long, sometimes ending as late as one in the morning, and the primary reaction of many in the audience was boredom.<sup>43</sup> In his introduction to his *Pygmalion*, al-Hakim looked back to this run of performances and bemoaned this poor response from the audience. He remembered that he had begun his career writing for the famous ‘Ukasha troupe and his plays, at that time, produced the entertainment and the *coup de théâtre* needed. The test, in those days, for whether his plays were good enough was whether the troupe leader’s children stayed awake during them. But in 1935 he asked himself “How have I got to this failure [*khayba*], that I write plays that [instead of keeping children awake] send adults to sleep if they watch them?”<sup>44</sup>

Trying to analyse the failure of the play, al-Hakim expounded his concept of “The Theatre of the Mind” [*Masrah al-dhihn*]. He argued that it was really a play that was not supposed to be acted on the stage at all and so any performance was bound to be a failure:

The reason is simple: today I set up my stage inside the mind and I make thoughts my actors, which move purely in the realm of meaning [*tataharrak fī muṭlaq al-ma ‘ānī*], dressed in the costumes of symbols. Indeed, I really have kept the spirit of the *coup de théâtre* but they are no longer in action [*al-ḥāditha*] as they are in thought [*al-fikra*].<sup>45</sup>

In his introduction to *Oedipus the King*, al-Hakim further developed his theories about Theatre of the Mind. He explained why he also considered *Oedipus Tyrannos* a play that was more suited to the page than the stage:

<sup>42</sup> *al-Risāla* 15 May, 1933, 35–39. Quotes from 37 and 39.

<sup>43</sup> MQAAK, 135–204 collects the contemporary reactions to the performance in 1935. An article in *Miṣr* 13 December, 1935, 2 (MQAAK, 154) mentions that the performance went until 1 (though it records the audience reaction as being positive). For boredom in the audience see e.g.: *al-Muqaṭṭam* 14 December, 1935, 11 (MQAAK, 159) and *al-Siyāsa* 18 December, 1935, 7–8 (MQAAK, 184–191 esp. 189).

<sup>44</sup> *Pygmalion* introduction from al-Hakim, *Complete Works* vol. 1, 863. I follow Muhammad Mandur in using this introduction *Pygmalion* to introduce a discussion of the theatre of the mind. See: Mandur *The Theatre of Tawfiq al-Hakim*, 34–40 for his discussion of this concept.

<sup>45</sup> al-Hakīm, *Complete Works* vol. 1, 863.

[T]he struggle between one emotion and another, or the struggle between one desire and another is the easiest struggle to produce in front of an audience. So, there is an obvious difficulty in producing [‘*an nubarriz*] plays where there is a struggle between one idea [*fikra*] and another in any other theatre than the Theatre of the Mind... The struggle between man and a hidden power which is greater than man – like “Time” [*zaman*], “Truth” [*ḥaqīqa*], or “Place” [*makān*] etc. – cannot be embodied in a way that suits the material theatre [*masraḥ al-māddī*], except by resorting to the pagan technique of embodiment.<sup>46</sup>

He could not do this using the ‘pagan technique’ of embodying abstract concepts on stage as gods that the Greeks had. So, he was forced to admit that his plays could not be enacted on the stage; that they must be played in the mind of the reader. He neatly sidesteps the fact that the gods are not portrayed on stage in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos*, though perhaps it is enough that it inhabits a polytheistic universe.

If we keep following this concept of Theatre of the Mind, the book itself, as a textual artefact, becomes a central focus for the theatricality of the play. One thing that al-Hakim was striving for in this adaptation was to turn the book into a potentially dramatic object. At the beginning of his introduction he complains that theatre is not considered literature [*adab*]. By this he means that theatre was only for the stage and not for reading in books (as it was in Europe). Many plays were not printed at all and if they were it was after, rather than before, performance. “[playwrights] did not consider [their plays] would have a glorious existence, far from the lights of the theatre.” In Egypt theatre was not taken seriously as an object of study and reading.<sup>47</sup>

With the Theatre of the Mind, he had at least achieved his goal of allowing theatre to exist in the context of a book alone. *The People of The Cave* might not have been successfully acted but the book was certainly well received. He was keen to stress that “the literati were unanimous in considering it a kind of Arabic literature, whether it was acted or not.”<sup>48</sup> This focus on the performativity is an important part of how the book is constructed. In fact, as this chapter will discuss, the interactions and exchanges between al-Hakim’s introduction, Aloys de Marignac’s introduction to the translation and al-Hakim’s response to it give the book as a whole a theatrical quality.

<sup>46</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 40–41. He cites the work of Jacques Boulenger, Remy de Gourmont and, particularly, Albert Thibaudet as background to his theory.

<sup>47</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King* 12–13. The quote from 12 is specifically talking about Aḥmad Shawqī’s plays but it holds for other playwrights.

<sup>48</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 40.



We should not, perhaps, make al-Hakim's theatrical theory too rigid. Although he thought it was hard, al-Hakim did not think it was impossible to represent the Theatre of the Mind on an actual stage. In his introduction to *Pygmalion* he did say that it was possible to produce these plays with a "special production" [*ihkrāj khāṣṣ*], quoting the director Lugné-Poe, who said of al-Hakim's play *Scheherezade* : "The story is well told but it deserves to be presented on the French stage with taste and intelligence". Al-Hakim lamented that this talented director was now too old to produce his plays, believing that he might have made something of them and in the course admitted that they could be performed.<sup>49</sup>

He imagined too that his Oedipus *might* be produced. He made sure to state at the end that, although he had made several decisions in his text that might make performance difficult, such as separating the action between the palace and the public square, there might be ways to maintain the unity of space and so facilitate a performance. "If a theatre director [*mukhrīj masrahī*] insisted on it, I give ample opportunity, for him to be able to express the atmosphere of the house and the atmosphere of the square at the same time without need of changing scenes."<sup>50</sup>

Some have even wondered whether he, truly, did not mean these plays to be performed on stage at all and was, in fact, making excuses for their failure on stage with an overly complex theory of performance. Perhaps if his plays had been critical successes on the stage he would not have needed to formulate this idea of Theatre of the Mind.<sup>51</sup> But this is little more than counter-factual speculation. Even if this was in part an intellectualisation of failure, it meant that his *Oedipus the King* was a play that appeared after a considerable amount of thinking about how a book can be theatrical without being performed and an attempt to write a play which did not depend solely on performance. It is an attempt to move towards a text of an Egyptian Oedipus that can be read away from the stage, yet still maintain its dramatic qualities. In fact, it does not ever appear to have been performed except, apparently, once "in Carthage in around 1970".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, 864. Quote in French : "Le conte a fort bien dit, mais cela mériterait d'être présent à la scène française avec goût et intelligence".

<sup>50</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 54.

<sup>51</sup> Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower*, 208–09. E.g. "It is difficult to know whether to take seriously al-Hakim's repeated statements that *Ahl al-Kahf* and its successors were written with no thought of performances in mind" (208).

<sup>52</sup> Long, *Tawfiq al-Hakim*, 59.

### Oedipus the King: Plot

The thoughts on ancient Greek history and performance that were provoked by his 1933 play are explored again in 1949 in his *Oedipus the King*. Al-Hakim wanted to create an Oedipus that could be the basis for a theatre tradition in Egypt and the Arab world which did not simply translate European plays into Arabic. He thought carefully about how *Oedipus Tyrannos* itself could be used in this context. Al-Hakim tells us, “I spent four years in this attempt, studying – without haste – every scene, every character, every issue.”<sup>53</sup> This study included reading Sophocles’ text as well as later translations and adaptations such as Seneca, Corneille, Voltaire, de Bouhelier, Cocteau, Gide, Yeats, Hofmannstahl.<sup>54</sup> His adaptation made some important changes to the Sophoclean original, which provoke discussion about some significant themes with implications for the play as a whole.

Firstly, al-Hakim’s text did follow the plot of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* reasonably closely. Particularly in the second act of three, many of the sections are almost straight translations from the original text.<sup>55</sup> Also, the time and setting of the narrative follow Sophocles’ very closely: i.e. it occurs all within the space of a day as Creon returns from the oracle at Delphi to give the god’s judgment about the plague afflicting Thebes. It also focuses on Oedipus’ discovery of the truth of his history and his parentage. It was very much an adaptation of Sophocles’ play, rather than a play inspired by the story of Oedipus. Yet, there are three specific changes which merit further discussion.

### Public and Private

The first change that al-Hakim made appears small but it has wide narrative and thematic implications. He decided that he could not maintain the tragic “Unity of Place” in his version of the Oedipus myth and it was for this reason that he set the action both inside the palace and in the public square. He did have some regrets about having to do this.<sup>56</sup> But there

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<sup>53</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 219

<sup>54</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King* 44–45. Denooz, *Entre Orient et Occident*, 31 n.3 argues that Cocteau was a particularly strong influence on al-Hakim’s Oedipus (see also 47–50, 145–46).

<sup>55</sup> Denooz, *Entre Orient et Occident*, 33–55 goes through the similarities and a few of the changes between the texts, pointing out several points of contact. I would also add, e.g., Oedipus speech on 59 is, in part based on OT 771–799 without the details of the oracle which says that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother for reasons that will become clear. At certain times, he uses parts from the original play but puts them in the mouth of other characters. For instance, on page 88 it is Jocasta who announces Creon’s approach with garlands on his head using almost exactly the words spoken by the priest at OT 82–3.

<sup>56</sup> As mentioned above, he thinks that there is a way to at least accomplish the effect without having to do scene changes.

was more to it than practicality. The introduction of this domestic setting into parts of the play became an important part of his adaptation. Al-Hakim wrote himself that “I thought that the family atmosphere [*jaww al-usra*] in Oedipus’ life was something that should not be ignored because around this pivot revolves the idea which constituted the reason I chose this play, specifically. And Oedipus’ family atmosphere cannot be created outside the house.”<sup>57</sup>

So, when the play opens it is inside the palace with Oedipus “leaning on a column” talking to Antigone and Jocasta. Firstly, this allowed al-Hakim to give the audience, who might not know the plot of Oedipus, some background events. Antigone asks Oedipus to “tell us the story of the monster you killed in the past” and Oedipus goes on to relate the story of the Sphinx, the riddle and his rise to the throne of Thebes.<sup>58</sup> So the audience is brought up to date with the important details of the myth which are not covered in Sophocles’ original. As al-Hakim notes, the audience’s ignorance of the finer points of the story was also a problem in French performances. Members of the audience, “especially the women”, were advised by Francisque Sarcey in the late nineteenth century to turn to a mythological dictionary before seeing the play.<sup>59</sup>

This change also allows al-Hakim to present a more developed picture of the relationship between Antigone and Oedipus. In Sophocles, this relationship is barely developed at all and people tend to assume that Oedipus’ children are very young. However, in al-Hakim, Antigone speaks often of her love for her father and in fact the play closes with Antigone wiping the tears off her father’s cheeks and telling him that he is a hero.<sup>60</sup> As well as intensifying the sense of “family” in the play, this emphasis on Antigone also foreshadows *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles’ last play whose events take place after the exile of Oedipus, when he lives as a wanderer accompanied by his daughter Antigone.

More importantly, this change made it easier to introduce an element of conjugal love between Oedipus and Jocasta. By putting a focus on the private life of the royal family and their “family atmosphere”, the play add an extra dimension to this relationship which is largely

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<sup>57</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 53–4. More on the reason he chose this play specifically is given later in the chapter.

<sup>58</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 57–65

<sup>59</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 21 & 53. The original quote comes from *Le Temps* 15 August, 1881, 1 : [I]l était évident que nombres des spectateurs ne comprenaient pas grand’chose à cette histoire... Je ne saurais trop recommander aux femmes, qui iront voir ce spectacle d’ouvrir le premier dictionnaire de mythologie venu et de lire d’avance les cent lignes où se résume la légende d’Œdipe.

<sup>60</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 201.

absent from Sophocles, one explicitly based on *love*. As Jocasta says at the beginning of the play:

[On the days Oedipus was solving the riddle of Sphinx] I was also posing myself a question, or a riddle, who do you think the victor will be and will I love him? How long I cried out from the depths of my soul in the quiet of the night: “who will the victor be: not over the monster but over my heart?” ... When I saw you, Oedipus, and I loved you. I knew that my riddle had been solved at last.<sup>61</sup>

This element of the relationship between Oedipus and his family and particularly Jocasta was purposely brought to the fore by al-Hakim. It is a change that has further implications which will be discussed below in the context of the third of al-Hakim’s changes.

### Plotting Tiresias and a Political Oedipus

The second change is a more radical divergence from the Sophoclean original than the first. It centres around the character of Tiresias and his relationship to Oedipus and to power in Thebes. In al-Hakim’s version Oedipus did not kill a sphinx that was terrorising the city when he first arrived, thereby winning the city’s throne and its queen, Jocasta, as his wife. Instead, what he killed was a simple lion. The scheming Tiresias then told him to claim it was a sphinx. He then taught him the supposed riddle and the answer that allowed him to defeat ‘the Sphinx’, thus bestowing on him the veneer of heroism that legitimated his rule. In an argument with Tiresias (in private) Oedipus imagines what he will say to the people when he admits the truth:

Listen sons of Thebes ... I am not a hero and I did not find a beast with the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle and the face of a woman, posing riddles... but what I found was, actually, just an ordinary lion. Tiresias, that skilful, blind man revealed an oracle to you – from himself not from any god – that this hero would become your next king because he did not want Creon to be your king then. Yes! It he who wanted this and organised it and who taught me the solution to this riddle about the animals that crawls on two hands and two feet.<sup>62</sup>

This is not the end of Tiresias’s plotting. In this new Egyptian version, the blind seer also concocted the prophecy that Laius and Jocasta had received about their son, hoping to influence the course of political events within the city and deceiving the ruling family:

And it was he who, long ago, inspired Laius to kill his son in the cradle, deluding the father into thinking that heaven has prophesied to him that, if the boy grew up, it would kill its father ... For he wanted the throne to go to someone outside

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<sup>61</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King* 75–76

the family [*raḡul gharīb*]... to set up someone on the throne with his human hand, someone who was born of his head, a product of his thought [*walīd ra'sihī wa-ṣanī'at fikrihi*].<sup>63</sup>

Tiresias, in al-Hakim's version, becomes a difficult but fascinating character, entirely different from the infuriating but seemingly omniscient priest of Sophocles' play. Al-Hakim's priest is a troubling presence, who is often hard to interpret but one who makes his mischievous force felt throughout. He stands almost separate from the tragedy itself. As he says at the end of the second act "for Oedipus and Jocasta it is a tragedy [*ma'sāa*] and for me it is a farce [*malhāa*]"'. And Oedipus realises early on in the play that Tiresias is playing a farcical role but he believes that he can play it with him. He claims "I am taking part in the farce with him [*ashtarik ma'hu fī-l-malhāa*]", whereas, in fact, Oedipus cannot escape the tragedy.<sup>64</sup>

These changes to the character of Tiresias have important effects on two major themes in the Oedipus story, as it appears in an Egyptian context: fate and politics.<sup>65</sup>

#### a) Fate

The introduction of a plotting Tiresias and his invention of false prophecies was necessary for al-Hakim's goal of writing a version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* that could be encompassed in an Islamic theology. This desire required an alteration to the role that fate and pre-destination played in the narrative of the play. Instead of a harsh prophecy imposed on Oedipus by a metaphysical order, his downfall is brought on by the schemes of the physical, mortal figure of Tiresias, who concocted the oracle for his own ends.

The workings of fate and prophecy in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, was seen as a central part of the narrative. The issue is taken up by an essay that al-Hakim printed at the end of his book as "the introduction to the French translation [of al-Hakim's *Oedipus the King*]" by Aloys de Marignac.<sup>66</sup> In this essay de Marignac lamented

<sup>63</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King* 76–77

<sup>64</sup> Quotes from al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 156, 75.

<sup>65</sup> Marvin Carlson 'Egyptian Oedipuses: Comedies or Tragedies' in Freddy Decreus and Mieke Kolk, *Rereading classics in 'East' and 'West': Post-Colonial Perspectives on the Tragic* (Gent: Documentatiecentrum voor Dramatische Kunst Gent, 2004), 368–75. Carlson looks at the character of Tiresias in this play and others to open up generic issues in Egyptian Oedipus, exploiting these ideas of comedy in particular, which is not my focus here.

<sup>66</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 203–11. De Marignac was a lecturer at Alexandria University for a while in the 1940s and he published his *Les Imitations Françaises de l'Oedipe-Roi de Sophocle* as part of a series by the University of Alexandria. There is something suspicious about this essay. I have not been able to find it in any French editions of the play and it seems odd for something from a translation to be attached to the first Arabic version of the play. I have, however, not been able to confirm these suspicions.

that although Oedipus is a story that is about a harsh, pre-determined fate [*al-qadar al-qāsī al-maḥtūm* in the Arabic translation] Christian adaptations of the play had not been able to include this central idea. “In the Christian World”, he argued, “the idea of a blind, pre-determined fate, a fate planned by the gods, with malice [*khubth*] and deception [*makr*] with the desire to do injury and evil [*irādat al-adhā wa-l-sharr*] – is an idea which cannot be considered.”<sup>67</sup> De Marignac was therefore hopeful that this absence could be rectified by al-Hakim who “is a Muslim who belongs to a world that does not deny the idea of fate... and does not believe in what the West believes in.” However, on reading the play he is disappointed that al-Hakim, like Christian authors, had also eliminated fate from the play.<sup>68</sup>

Al-Hakim was not willing to play the role that this Swiss scholar wanted him to play. In fact, he reacted against it, complaining that the European view of Islamic fate was totally erroneous. He contested the entries of two dictionaries (Larousse and Flammarion), which both say that “completely predestined fate [*al-qadar al-muṭlaq al-maḥtūm*] is a belief of Greece and the Muslims”. He responded that, “As far as I am concerned – as a Muslim – my religious belief rejects the idea that: ‘God is the organiser of man’s pain [*adhā al-insān*], planning it beforehand without cause or offence [*dūn muqtaḍin aw jarīratin*]’.”<sup>69</sup> To back up his statement that Islamic ideas of fate would not allow for a case like that of Oedipus, who is condemned before he is even born, he quoted arguments of the philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the jurist Abu Hanifa, who both rejected a totally predetermined fate.<sup>70</sup> In the end he concluded that idea of fate in Islam was not the simplistic belief system that Europeans believed it was, but might be compatible with current scientific ideas about genetics and predeterminism. One’s genes have some effect on the course of one’s life but individuals also have choice: “It is known [by scientists] today that there is degree of force [*miqdār min al-jabr*] and a degree of freedom [*miqdār min al-ḥurriyya*]... and the spirit of Islam is in line with this theory.”<sup>71</sup>

So, a crucial thing that al-Hakim needed to do to make this play fit into an Islamic conception of fate, was not to allow Oedipus to be condemned to punishment before he was

<sup>67</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 205.

<sup>68</sup> Quote from al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 208–09.

<sup>69</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 214. The quotation marks are al-Hakim’s. He is perhaps summarising the statements from Aloys de Marignac’s introduction but not directly quoting any passage (at least not as it appears in Arabic). Equally, he might just be summarising the general European view of Islamic fate.

<sup>70</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 215.

<sup>71</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 218–19.

even born. Instead, everything was stage-managed by Tiresias and his downfall, although catastrophic, was not the result of an inescapable divine decree.

Within the larger narrative of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, this means he is faced with a problem. The oracle is a difficult thing to write out of the plot. Oedipus, unless one makes radical changes, is narratively pre-determined to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Tiresias, in al-Hakim's version, invented the oracle to scare Laius into killing his son and allowing him to manipulate the succession. Yet in the play, its predictions do come to pass, seemingly without Tiresias needing to accomplish them himself. Al-Hakim does not seem to have an explanation for the apparent inescapability of the oracle and Tiresias becomes at times a manipulator of divine superstition and belief in the oracle and at other times someone with quasi-divine powers to accomplish his will without seeming to do anything.

He even admitted himself that it was hard completely to eliminate fate from the story. "Thus, a kind of sphinx confronts the authors as well, cutting off their path: it is the contradiction that they are put into; as you [Aloys de Marignac] say: they cannot receive the superstition [*khurāfa*] as it is yet, at the same time, they cannot deal with the story of Oedipus without this superstition."<sup>72</sup>

His solution to this problem simultaneously both questions and, to an extent, accepts that a divine system is acting on Oedipus. "Indeed there are divine traps, without doubt, which God has set up but not for any specific human, rather for any human who transgresses from the laws... All I wanted to say is that the battle in Oedipus is not between arrogant gods, who attack an innocent man and track him down specifically, but it is a struggle between the will of god and the will of man." This explanation, which is a little hard to fathom, has proved unsatisfactory for some commentators. Paul Starkey says that "al-Ḥakīm's attempts at reworking the legend do not resolve the dilemmas thrown up by Sophocles' play: when the truth has been discovered and the will of Heaven proved supreme, the same questions of guilt and responsibility remain."<sup>73</sup>

In order to reconcile this seeming contradiction, we must reconsider what role fate plays in the original *Oedipus Tyrannos*. It is not the simple one that many people apply to it. In a 1966 article, 'On Misunderstanding the "Oedipus Rex"', E.R. Dodds criticised the view that Oedipus is unjustly persecuted by capricious gods in Sophocles' original. He argued that

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<sup>72</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 214. I follow W.M. Hutchins in translating *khurāfa* as "superstition" rather than e.g. "myth" because al-Hakim is referring specifically to ideas of fate rather than the myth as a whole and "superstition" is more indicative of this.

<sup>73</sup> Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower*, 81.

“the modern reader slips into [the ‘tragedy of destiny’ model] easily because *we* think of two clear-cut alternative views- either we believe in free-will or we are determinists. But fifth-century Greeks did not think in these terms any more than Homer did”. Fate is a more complex issue than we often conceive.<sup>74</sup>

A reading of Dodds and al-Hakim together can shed light on both. The classical Greek idea of “fate” is not simply a matter of the gods enacting their will upon men. “Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine foreknowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are predetermined,” said Dodds.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, al-Hakim’s Islamic ideas of fate also have these same tensions between determinism and free-will, which do not fit easily into modern conceptions of the subject. Perhaps al-Hakim himself, in claiming to have altered the Greek conception of fate, was too quick to assign simplistic views about fate to the Greeks just as he thinks the French dictionaries assigned them to Muslims.

With this attempt to Islamicise the idea of fate in Oedipus, al-Hakim might not have created an obvious solution but he had managed to bring some of the underlying difficulties of the original to the fore. In Sophocles, the extent to which Oedipus is an innocent victim or not are just as troubling as they are in al-Hakim.

In his response to de Marignac, al-Hakim used genetic and physical phenomena as ways to try to explain the difficulties of a fatalistic construction of the world and the play:

[Scientists] are now asking themselves to what extent inherited traits are concealed in the sperm, which bring about children pre-guided, without free-will, and restricted [*musayyarīn. mujbarīn. muqayyadīn.*] and to what point the human body is a precise machine, in which everything runs in a [pre-]stamped calculation [*ḥisāb marqūm*] and in a pre-determined direction [*ittijāh maḥtūm*].

He went on to talk about the movement of gasses, where each individual particle appears to move around freely but when viewed as part of the whole there appears to be some kind of overarching control:

“Even in the world of gasses, there is an amount of freedom and leeway, outside the scope of their rigorous laws... That is: the existence of the law necessitates the existence of deviation from the law. This also necessitates a kind of punishment, not in the disturbance of the results [*ikhtilāl al-natā’ij*] alone but the return of the fault into order and putting the rebellious [element] back in its place.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> E. R. Dodds, ‘On Misunderstanding the “Oedipus Rex”’, *Greece & Rome* 13, no. 1 (1966): 37–49. esp. 42–44. Quote from 42.

<sup>75</sup> Dodds, ‘On Misunderstanding the “Oedipus Rex”’, 42.

<sup>76</sup> Both quotes from al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 218.



In these examples, ideas of free-will and determinism are tested to their limits. It is just as hard to say whether the movement of a gas is “free” or “determined” as it is to say whether Oedipus had “free-will” or not. In the plot of the play itself the role of fate remains unclear. Tiresias makes up the oracle to impose his will upon power but eventually, unknown to him until the end, the invented oracle turns out to be correct. As in Sophocles’ play Oedipus still ends up suffering the effects of this oracle, although its relationship to the divine sphere has been changed. These contradictions are probably unresolvable. However, in his writing and thinking, al-Hakim has reinvigorated these questions of fate.

### b) Politics

Tiresias’ scheming and cynical string-pulling, combined with al-Hakim’s removal of the oracle and diminished power of divine pre-determination in the play, has led people to call al-Hakim’s version a “political” play and Tiresias its key “politician”. Nehad Selaiha in her review of the play and all subsequent Egyptian Oedipuses argues that they “view the myth from a political perspective, leaving aside the central conflict between Oedipus and the gods and centring the plot on a power struggle, riddled with conspiracies.”<sup>77</sup> Marvin Carlson’s introduction to his collection of translations says that there is “no question that al-Hakim’s Oedipus is much more directly involved with Theban political intrigue than that of Sophocles.”<sup>78</sup> Aloys de Marignac designates Tiresias the role of “that skilful politician [*dhālik al-siyāsī al-bārī*]”.<sup>79</sup>

General consensus holds that this Oedipus is a “political” play but we must also ask in what way, exactly, it is political and how the politics are manifested in the play. We could, for instance, focus on the character of Tiresias to construct this as a play of political intrigue, plotting and manipulation. In this model, Oedipus is the, more or less, innocent victim – not of a malicious oracle but of a malicious priest. This interpretation focuses on internal palace politics and has a clear villain and a clear hero.

However, in the context of 1940s Egypt, it is possible to read the play alongside specific political events of the time. Sami Munir ‘Amir, building on an association he makes

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<sup>77</sup> Nehad Selaiha, ‘Oedipus in Egypt’, in *Receptions of Antiquity*, ed. Jan Nelis (Gent: Academia Press, 2011), 153–60. Quote from 157. Reworked from an article that appeared in *al-Ahram Weekly* 6-12 December, 2001.

<sup>78</sup> Carlson, *The Arab Oedipus*, 6–7.

<sup>79</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 208.

between Tiresias and British colonial powers, argued that we should see the play as a direct comment on contemporary politics:

Does this previous description [of the political scheming of Tiresias] not go back to the colonialism which controlled the fate [*muqaddarāt*] of Egypt at that time and began to pit the people against each other, arrange coups in secret against governments which it had made with its own hands but that it found was not accomplishing its wishes? [All this] because it knew about the people: their languor and their willingness to put their loads onto a character whom they trusted with a completely blind trust to deal with their affairs.<sup>80</sup>

‘Amir goes further than noting a similarity between the scheming of Tiresias and the scheming of British colonial rule and ties the events of the play into a specific political event in 1942.

So, al-Hakim imagines [*yuṣawwir*] Oedipus imposed as a ruler upon the people by Tiresias, with the justification that he best knew what the benefit of the people was. This is what the colonial power [Britain] did in Egypt in 1942 when it imposed the Wafd Party [the party with the biggest constituency] on the people and the palace in the events of 4 February. For it [the Wafd Party] was a son of Egypt and at the same time it embodied the will of the colonial Tiresias who could have a kind of imposed, unconstitutional link between the Wafd and its great mother, Egypt, and I see Jocasta to be the best embodiment [*mathal*] of this in the play.<sup>81</sup>

In this slightly complex analogy ‘Amir argues that events of the play are designed to closely mirror the events of 1942, in which the British rolled tanks in front of the palace to impose their own man, Mustafa al-Nahhas from the Wafd party, on King Farouq, installing him as prime minister with a Wafd government. In this play, then, Tiresias represents the British, Oedipus is al-Nahhas and Jocasta or, perhaps, the people of Thebes represent the Egyptian people.<sup>82</sup>

If one keeps following this logic it becomes very – perhaps unnecessarily – complex<sup>83</sup> and drawing such close equivalencies between characters in a play and historical events is

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<sup>80</sup> Sāmī Munīr ‘Āmir, *al-Masrah al-Miṣrī Ba‘da al-Ḥarb al-‘Ālamiyya al-Thāniyya* [Egyptian Theatre after the Second World War], vol. 2 (Alexandria: GEBO, 1978), 26–36.. Quote from 28–29.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Āmir *Egyptian Theatre After the Second World War*, 30.

<sup>82</sup> On the events of 4<sup>th</sup> February 1942 see Charles D. Smith, ‘4 February 1942: Its Causes and Its Influence on Egyptian Politics and on the Future of Anglo-Egyptian Relations, 1937-1945’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 4 (1979): 453–79.

<sup>83</sup> Many questions arise such as: If Jocasta represents ‘the people’, who do ‘the people’ in the play represent? Where is King Farouq in all of this, who was a major player? In the play Tiresias tries to

almost always dangerous. However, the general point is hard to deny: that al-Hakim in this play was engaging with political ideas that were prevalent at the time and informed by current events. It seems very likely that, in a broad sense, the behind-the-scenes machinations of the British, together with the political weakness of King Farouq, the debates between political parties about their relationship to colonial powers and the ramifications of the Second World War, all informed this adaptation. Published in 1949, it preceded the revolution of 1952, which eventually brought Nasser to power, by only 3 years. Al-Hakim too was a writer who was interested in politics. Indeed, later in his career, he tells a story about turning down an invitation to meet Nasser for tea near the beginning of his rule. The Egyptian president is surprised and says “Have we not done what he thought, felt and wrote about? Indeed, the revolution is his revolution!”<sup>84</sup>

There are other wider and more profitable ways we can construct the play as “political”. Shifting the focus away from Tiresias alone and looking at the political atmosphere of post-war Egypt more generally can show how al-Hakim was using the political themes of *Oedipus Tyrannos* and developing the ideas that we have seen were embryonic in George Abyad’s version of the play. *Oedipus*, in Egypt, became a play that was very invested in how a ruler should relate to his people

The Egyptian classical scholar Ahmed Etman [1945-2013] has noted the play’s frequent implicit and explicit criticism of “the people” and this is an insight worth developing. “For the people [*al-sha‘b*] – as we understand from the play – are not comfortable with having a will [of their own] and as soon as they get it in their hands they misuse it and give it away to a hero [*baṭal*] ... or to a god who covers them in clouds of dreams.” Al-Hakim, for Etman, interspersed the play with “a bitter criticism of the naivety of the people”.<sup>85</sup>

These underlying views about the people and their desire for a hero can help us get more political resonances from the character of Tiresias and his relationship to Oedipus. During his conversations with Oedipus, trying to convince him not to tell the people the truth of their schemes, Tiresias issues a warning, stressing the people’s desire to hand over responsibility to a hero: “Don’t forget that you are the hero of this city. Because Thebes needs a hero, it believed in the myth of the Sphinx, so be careful of distressing the people in their beliefs.”<sup>86</sup> The people themselves provide some evidence for Tiresias’ statements, standing

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stop the throne going to a member of a royal family only to be foiled when it turns out that Oedipus is in fact the son of Laius. How does this fit into the analogy in which Oedipus is the Wafd Party?

<sup>84</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakīm, *‘Awdat al-Wa‘ī [The Return of Consciousness]* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2006), 36.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Atmān, *The Classical Sources in the Theatre of Tawfiq al-Hakim*, 63-5. Quotes from 63, 65.

<sup>86</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 78.

behind Oedipus in those terms. “We will never forget that you are the hero who saved us from the Sphinx,” the chorus says at the beginning of the second act “strike your enemies without mercy.” Other characters in the play repeat Tiresias’ criticism of the people. One priest of the temple cast doubts on their judgement and their capacity to make reasoned decisions. He says that the people “are nourished on fantasy and not on facts [*yaṭ’am bi-l-khayāl lā bi-l-ḥaqā’iq*]”.<sup>87</sup>

The inherently political theme of Oedipus’ heroism and the people’s need for a hero runs through the play. As they first appear, one of the very first things that they cry out is: “The people who have called upon you as a hero [*nādā bika baṭalan*] and sat you upon the throne ... ask you to stand up in their defence and rise in their aid.”<sup>88</sup> Then as the play moves on, in the third act, even after the truth about Oedipus is revealed, the people still say “despite this he is our king and our hero [*baṭalunā*]”.<sup>89</sup>

It is this blind faith of the people that helps Tiresias manipulate Oedipus. In a conversation between the two, Oedipus says he will tell the people that “I am not a hero ... this is your naïve fantasy.” However, Tiresias manages to convince him not to. He argues that the naïve hopes of the people mean Oedipus is forced to be their leader.<sup>90</sup> In act 3 Oedipus says this more explicitly “I am not a hero, nor am I a criminal. I am just one man upon whom people have thrown their illusions.”<sup>91</sup> In this play, it is the desire of the people to be led that is forcing Oedipus to be their leader and Tiresias is able to exploit this.

This is a political interpretation which might help us delve deeper into al-Hakim’s political reactions to the late 1940s in Egypt, beyond the specific events of February 1942. The post-war period was one of great political division and uncertainty and the issues that this play raised were important ones. King Farouq was looking increasingly selfish, incompetent and dissolute. The parliamentary democracy was in crisis, violence was breaking out on the streets and in the winter of 1948-9 the prime-minister Nuqrashi and the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna were both assassinated. Meanwhile, the British were continuing their efforts to manipulate events behind the scenes.

In this atmosphere, the question of who might rule and how the people should be ruled was not academic, it was pressing. The idea of a single hero was hard for al-Hakim to maintain.

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<sup>87</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 113–14.

<sup>88</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 67.

<sup>89</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 176.

<sup>90</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 75.

<sup>91</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 166.

The king had too many failings to look up to and individual politicians in whom people put their faith were being assassinated. Therefore, a play that questioned the role and nature of a single man's rule over a state offered Tawfiq al-Hakim rich material. He was not departing from the spirit of Sophocles' play but was getting to the heart of one of the issues that would excite critics as the century continued. As I have already discussed in chapter two, Oedipus could be drawn not as a play about fate, incest or psychology but as a political play about political rule.<sup>92</sup>

The political aspects of al-Hakim's play find parallels in Sophocles' original text (and modern scholarship on it) as well as in Egyptian politics of the time. However, an important aspect of the play, which does not have obvious parallels in the original is al-Hakim's rather conservative, condescending attitude towards the people. He is caught in a bind between a suspicion of autocracy and a suspicion of the people, whom he feels too often lean towards autocracy.

This, in al-Hakim's version, is Oedipus dilemma: to discover how to be a hero for the people. Yet, he must do this despite the people, not with them. In a narrative where the Sphinx was fake and so saving the city from the Sphinx cannot be classed as heroism, Oedipus seeks ways to be called a hero. At the end of the first act he says "I have not yet established that I can fittingly be called a hero [*khalīq 'an usammā baṭalan*]. Indeed, my defeat of the monster will not be compared to the bravery with which I shall defeat the treachery [of Creon etc.]"<sup>93</sup> He transfers heroism from one failed deed (the Sphinx) to the new deed he will accomplish for the city but still keeps a focus on something *he* must accomplish.

As the play progresses, though, Oedipus finds a different way to be called a hero: by leaving the city. Antigone, as she accompanies Oedipus into exile, wiping away his tears, says: "You are the hero of Thebes". Oedipus responds: "My dear Antigone. Do you still believe that I am a hero ? No... I am no longer that today, my daughter. Rather, I was never a hero on any day." She tells him "Father. You were never a hero like you are today!"<sup>94</sup> It is as Oedipus leaves the city that he becomes a hero. Oedipus, who has been struggling to become the hero that the people want, finally accomplishes it by leaving the city.

This complicates, though does not disprove, al-Hakim's conservatism. He wants the people to stop relying on a single ruler but the role of the people in this decision is negligible

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<sup>92</sup> pg. 69–70.

<sup>93</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 107.

<sup>94</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King* 200–01.

or detrimental. The people remain loyal to Oedipus and it is *he* who must take the decision himself to leave them. In both ways the trusting people are being dictated to by their leader and the impetus never comes from them. This is a theme that is repeated in the criticism of Ali Salem's 1970 Oedipus and represents a paternalistic way of thinking about politics that formed a prominent strand amongst the Egyptian intelligentsia for much of the twentieth century.<sup>95</sup>

#### Actuality vs Truth [*al-Wāqi'* vs *al-Haqīqa*]

The third change that al-Hakim made to the play was the most radical. It is also one that al-Hakim says was his main reason for choosing Oedipus specifically – rather than another of Sophocles' plays. He says that "[he] saw in it something which did not occur to Sophocles. [He] saw in it not a struggle between man and fate ... [rather he saw] the war between actuality [*al-wāqi'*] and truth [*al-ḥaqīqa*]." <sup>96</sup>

In Sophocles' play, as Jocasta realises that Oedipus' questioning will lead to the discovery that he is her son, she cries out: "Alas, Alas, wretched man. This alone am I able to say to you, and nothing more afterwards."<sup>97</sup> After this, she leaves the stage and, true to her word, we do not hear anything more from her until the messenger enters to deliver the news that she has killed herself.

Tawfiq al-Hakim played this scene very differently. After she realises the terrifying conclusion Oedipus is moving towards, Jocasta says "I cannot stay a moment longer... I can't... I can't". However, instead of leaving, as Sophocles' Jocasta does, she is persuaded to stay by Oedipus and the chorus, postponing her death. Then, at the beginning of the third act, after Oedipus has finally discovered his true parentage he does something surprising. Jocasta is distressed about the revelation of their true relationship but Oedipus comforts her:

So let me be your husband and your son. Neither names nor descriptions change the emotions and love that is rooted in hearts. Let Antigone and her siblings be my children or my siblings. For none of these situations changes the love and affection I hide in my heart for them. I admit to you, Jocasta, that I have received a blow that almost floored me. But it was not able, at all, to make me change my feeling towards you for an instant. For you will always be Jocasta, whatever I hear about you being my mother and my sister. Nothing will change that actuality [*wāqi'*]: that you are and will always be Jocasta to me.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Mahmoud el Lozy, 'Brecht and the Egyptian Political Theatre', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 10 (1990): 56–72.

<sup>96</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 43.

<sup>97</sup> OT 1072-3 ἰὸν ἰοῦ, δύστηνε: τοῦτο γάρ σ' ἔχω μόνον προσεῖπεν, ἄλλο δ' οὐποθ' ὕστερον.

<sup>98</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 162

Oedipus wants to continue his marriage with Jocasta even after he has learnt the truth of his origins.

Al-Hakim explained this change with a reference to *al-wāqi* ' (the actuality) and *al-ḥaqīqa* (the truth) and the clash between these two ideas. In the case of Oedipus and Jocasta it is the “actuality” of their love and the “truth” of the familial relationship to each other.<sup>99</sup> Whereas Oedipus wants to continue in the “actuality” of their love, Jocasta cannot ignore the “truth” that he is her son:

Jocasta: The truth [*al-ḥaqīqa*] has taken its revenge on us all, a revenge that we cannot stand again after.

Oedipus: Don't say that Jocasta. We can stand. Rise with me. Let us put our fingers in our ears. Let us live in actuality [*al-wāqi* ]; in the life in which our hearts beat, effusive in love and mercy.

Jocasta: I cannot Oedipus. I cannot stay with you. Your love for your family has blinded you.

[Oedipus continues a little later...]

Oedipus: Truth [*al-ḥaqīqa*]. What strength does truth have? If it was a ferocious lion with sharp claws and fangs, then I would kill it and throw it far from our path. But it is a thing which only exists in our minds. It is an illusion [*wahm*]. It is a ghost.<sup>100</sup>

For al-Hakim, *this* is the metaphysical struggle within the play which means that it is best suited to the Theatre of the Mind. While other parts of the play may have an emotional aspect that could be enacted on stage, it is this particular clash which is best performed in the mind, with ideas as actors.

It is also this struggle between truth and actuality, with its effect on the plot of Oedipus, that has been taken up by many scholars. Muhammad Mandur's collection of essays from 1960 on al-Hakim's theatre, for instance, makes 'Truth and Actuality [*al-ḥaqīqa wa-l-wāqi* ]' the title of one essay. If tragedy, in its true sense as understood by people with “religious feelings”, is about the struggle between man and something greater than man, then this is the tragic struggle of al-Hakim's adaptation, between actuality and truth. The actuality of human emotions and human bonds meets something that is more powerful than man – the truth of their history – and this meeting causes the tragic tension in the play.

<sup>99</sup> al-Hakīm, also says that the same struggle can be found between Prisca and Mishilinia in *People of the Cave*.

<sup>100</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King* 164, 166.

This struggle is something that runs through many of al-Hakim's works. Al-Hakim himself ties the struggle between truth and reality to his play *People of the Cave*. However, Paul Starkey convincingly ties it to another play written around the same time as *Oedipus the King*: *La Tabḥathī 'an al-Ḥaqīqa* [Don't Search for the Truth], "written in 1947, at a time when al-Ḥakīm had already started work on [his] reinterpretation of the Oedipus legend".<sup>101</sup> In this play, a wife's suspicions are roused after finding love letters in her husband's pocket. She asks him to tell her the truth about them. After trying to make up a story about the letters being written for a love-shy friend he admits that they are for a dancer. However, she should not care about "the truth" of this affair as "the actuality" of their own relationship is more important.<sup>102</sup> He compares it to a film they saw the night before. As the wife says "it does not bother me whether what happened in the story was true or imaginary, what matters to me is what actually happened to me [*mā waqa'a lī bi-l-fi'l*] in terms of effect and emotion".<sup>103</sup> It is an odd short dialogue which, Starkey paints as an unsatisfactory resolution to the problems of the play: "the problems of communication ... are solved by agreeing not to communicate." It is also an important previous discussion of this idea of a struggle between "truth" and "actuality".<sup>104</sup>

It is particularly instructive to put these two plays together because of their discussion of love and marriage and it is also possible to take the connection Starkey makes between the two plays further. In *Don't Search for the Truth* as in *Oedipus the King*, "actuality" is the love of a married couple and the "truth" is something that risks derailing their relationship. As discussed above, al-Hakim makes the significant addition of a loving family relationship to the plot of Oedipus. Rather than simply a relationship of power, Oedipus and Jocasta have a relationship of "love".

Both of these plays, whether intentionally or not, show us "love marriage" with a dark underside. This kind of marriage, constructed in contemporary discourse as empowering for

<sup>101</sup> The play is printed in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *al-Masrah al-Munawwa' [The Diverse Theatre]* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, n.d.), 793–801.

<sup>102</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *The Diverse Theatre*, 800: "Forget about the truth [*al-ḥaqīqa*] for it is just prattle and let us focus our attention on the actuality [*al-wāqi'*]."

<sup>103</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *The Diverse Theatre*, 801.

<sup>104</sup> Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower*. For the discussion of *Don't Search for the Truth* and *Oedipus the King* see 75–84. Quotes from 78, 77. This play can also be read in interesting ways against the title story in Yūsuf Idrīs *Bayt min Laḥm [House of Flesh]* (Cairo: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1971). In it a widow with three daughters, who have not been able to get engaged, marries a blind sheikh. The daughters fail to find husbands but still desire conjugal relations so they switch places with their mother in bed. The first time the Sheikh notices but afterwards they all take turns wearing the wedding ring. The blind man maintains an (extremely) willful ignorance. In the last paragraph, the reader is asked to question whether he can be seen as responsible. The clear conclusion is that even if he cannot say for certain who he is sleeping with, his ignorance is no excuse.



women, is used instead to *control* the women in the two plays under the banner of “love”. In the first play the wife is told not to worry about infidelity but focus only on the “actuality” of love. In *Oedipus the King*, Jocasta is told to ignore the incestuous relationship and focus only on the “actuality” of their love. Although in *Don't Search for the Truth*, the wife relents to her husband, in *Oedipus the King* Jocasta does not. Faced with her husband's argument that, since this is a marriage of love, love should be the only concern, she rebels. The “truth” proves more important for Jocasta, who – like Sophocles' Jocasta – hangs herself rather than face any more of this “love marriage”. This puts an end to the struggle between “truth” and “actuality” in al-Hakim's *Oedipus the King*.

### Al-Hakim's Arabic Oedipus: Success or Failure?

One question dominates the work itself and the criticism of it: was the play a success or a failure? This is a question that gets to the heart of many of al-Hakim's concerns. The text was the product of four years' work and extensive study but even al-Hakim himself was deeply invested in asking whether his project could be called a “success” or not. At the beginning of his introduction he asked.

I do not know what I have made with this tragedy...

Have I done well in my courage or badly?...

Will Arabic literature swallow this form?...

I have tried ... That is all I can do...<sup>105</sup>

In general, it has to be said that the critical response to the play has been negative.<sup>106</sup> Muhammad Mandur said, simply, “the play, *Oedipus the King*, is considered among the weakest of plays, not in relation to Sophocles and his likes but also in relation to Tawfiq al-Hakim [and his oeuvre].” He closed his article by saying “the play did not succeed from a dramatic perspective, nor did it work from an abstract, intellectual perspective, its failure was total and complete [*kān fashaluhā tāmmān muṭbiqan*].”<sup>107</sup>

One point of criticism is the issue of fate. Aloys de Marignac's introduction to the French translation was particularly concerned with this issue. He felt that if one tried to

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<sup>105</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 54.

<sup>106</sup> In fact, I have not found any truly positive appraisals of the play even if some are less negative than others.

<sup>107</sup> Mandūr, *The Theatre of Tawfiq al-Hakim*, 75, 76. Long, *Tawfiq al-Hakim*, 60 is forced to agree that “much of what Mandur says is justified”.

eliminate the issue of fate, as al-Hakim did, it would always come back. “That superstition [*khurāfa* i.e. the oracle] is stronger than the author who uses it. So it is no wonder that, if Tawfiq al-Hakim intended to use this ancient subject to express psychological or political ideas, he would not be able – and this was Voltaire’s and Gide’s issue – to prevent the issue of predetermined fate from reappearing in more scene than one.”<sup>108</sup> Starkey adds that “al-Ḥakīm’s attempts at reworking the legend do not resolve the dilemmas thrown up by Sophocles’ play: when the truth has been discovered and the will of Heaven proved supreme, the same questions of guilt and responsibility remain.” He concludes, “[t]he author of the introduction to the French translation of the play [de Marignac] is therefore arguably justified in his view that al-Ḥakīm has not succeeded in preventing the appearance of ‘fate’ in his version of the story of Oedipus.”<sup>109</sup>

However, the most common cause for complaint among critics is the third change that al-Hakim made to Sophocles’ play, making Oedipus try to convince Jocasta to keep up their marriage. Starkey also criticises this in addition to the problems of fate. “To say that this interpretation of the Oedipus legend is unconvincing is an understatement... To suggest that Oedipus could simply ‘throw away’ his past is both an intellectual and a psychological absurdity.”<sup>110</sup>

Arabic scholars tend to focus on a different aspect of this alteration to the plot. If al-Hakim is trying to construct an Oedipus that is acceptable to an Islamic, religious audience in Egypt, he has given them quite an odd one. His Islamic Oedipus is one who is willing to commit incest. As Ahmed Etman, said “al-Hakim wanted to make an Arabic-Muslim hero from Oedipus and ended up with an image that was more disgusting [*absha* ʿ] than the one which the pagan world knew.”<sup>111</sup> Muhammad Mandur said that this Oedipus with his incestuous relationship “has lost our sympathy and provoked our disgust [*ishmi’zāz*].”<sup>112</sup> A more recent critic has said that “al-Ḥakīm seems to have failed in rewriting the Oedipus myth in harmony with the teachings of Islam, as his Oedipus refuses to leave his mother–wife even

<sup>108</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 211.

<sup>109</sup> Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower*, 81.

<sup>110</sup> Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower*, 85. Starkey does not generally have a positive view of al-Hakim’s output. Pierre Cachia’s review of the book from *Journal of Arabic Literature* vol. 20, No. 2 (Sep., 1989): 209–12, says that “the word ‘critical’ in the title of the book must be taken in the popular sense of ‘fault-finding’” (210).

<sup>111</sup> ‘Atmān, *The Classical Sources of al-Hakim’s Theatre*, 53.

<sup>112</sup> Mandūr, *The Theatre of Tawfiq al-Hakim*, 74.

after unravelling the truth of his incestuous marriage, and he does not even regret committing incest.”<sup>113</sup>

The criticism that this play is against Islamic teachings is not entirely fair on al-Hakim. He never stated that with his play he intended to produce a religious manifesto in the shape of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Rather, as we have seen, he intended to write an adaptation of Sophocles’ tragedy that both fitted into an Islamic view of the physical and metaphysical world and also made use of the religious feeling in the audience to make a modern work that could be classed as a “tragedy in the true sense”. For him this Eastern tragedy could only exist within a religious world-view but this did not mean the play had to be a religious tract. Nor was Oedipus designed to be an unproblematic model for emulation. As discussed above, the idea of heroism and the figure of the hero was one that al-Hakim sought to interrogate in this play. Oedipus might be the hero [*baṭal*] in this play but that does not mean he is heroic (in the modern sense).

As al-Hakim explained, the play is primarily religious insofar as it assumes “religious feelings” in its audience and so can portray a struggle between man and something higher than man.<sup>114</sup> In this play, this means the struggle between “actuality” and “truth”. The “actuality” of the human world, the physical world of people, is set against a more abstract concept of “truth”. For someone who does not see anything beyond man, as for Oedipus in this play, metaphysical “truth” can seem to be a “ghost” or an “illusion”.<sup>115</sup> However, as a reader (or member of a real or imagined audience) with religious feeling was surely meant to pick up on, this more abstract truth has real power and Oedipus does not continue his relationship with Jocasta. As the struggle between the two versions of truth play out, al-Hakim’s tragic vision is realised, in the mind of the reader.

This struggle, in fact, recurs throughout the play in different ways. The most obvious example of the struggle between “actuality” and “truth” – and the one that al-Hakim’s introduction singles out – is the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta. However, we also see it in other contexts. For instance, we can see it in the nature of Oedipus’ rule. The “actuality” of his rule is set against the “truth” of its origins. He sits on the throne by virtue of the lies and schemes of Tiresias (in which he participated) and so his rule is not built on any

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<sup>113</sup> Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz, ‘The Arab Oedipus: Oriental Perspectives on the Myth’, *Modern Drama* 55, no. 2 (2012): 171–96. Quote from 177.

<sup>114</sup> It is religious, in a secondary sense, insofar as it does not actively contradict Islamic conceptions of the functioning of fate and the divine.

<sup>115</sup> “I am not afraid for myself of the truth” says Oedipus at al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 77.

“truth”. Then, as the “actuality” of it begins to fall apart the “truth” behind it is revealed to be false.

### Conclusion: Failure

Al-Hakim used Oedipus to interrogate several different concepts – generic, religious, political, psychological, emotional and more – and opened up countless different aspects of human sociality in Sophocles’ text such as fate, monarchy, the will of the people and love. He used a single play to explore all of these issues and it is, consequently, a difficult play to tie down.

If we follow scholarly consensus, the play was, strictly speaking, “a failure”. Certain specific aspects of the play have ignited the ire of critics. However, it is not simply specific parts of the play that could be criticised. The ideas in the text are often difficult to juggle and unite into a comprehensive whole. The breadth, complexity and (perhaps even) contradiction of the numerous elements in the text mean that it is tempting to agree with al-Hakim when he says that it is a play for the mind rather than the stage. Despite the popularity and reputation of al-Hakim, there is no record of this play having been produced in Egypt to this day. It would no doubt be difficult to follow, even with an in-depth knowledge of Sophocles’ original.

Yet, the text itself has a knowing, complex engagement with failure. Al-Hakim himself is not an easy author to tie down. I have argued that he was often deeply conservative. This was manifested, for instance, in the disdain in which his *Oedipus the King* holds ‘the people’. However, he was also a writer who tried frequently to undermine himself and undercut his own pretensions.

This can be seen in his argument that Egyptian theatre needed an authentic pedigree to be taken seriously. From one side, he was attempting a monumental task of constructing a rigidly defined type of theatre, not accepting the possibility of organic experimentation and borrowing. He, slightly self-aggrandisingly, said in the introduction to a 1956 collection of plays, “I have embarked upon a journey in thirty years which took the theatrical literature of other languages around two thousand years.”<sup>116</sup> From the other side, in common with much modernist theatre or avant-garde theatre in the twentieth century, al-Hakim almost seems to be courting the idea of failure.<sup>117</sup> The assessments that this play failed might be justified, but

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<sup>116</sup> al-Hakīm, *The Diverse Theatre*, 7.

<sup>117</sup> Olga Taxidou, ‘Some Failures in the Theatre: Modernist Performance, Failure and Utopia’, in *[R]evolutions: R/evolutions*, ed. W. Steele and J. Craig (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 8–22.

they do not appreciate that failure is not simply a product of the project, but something that is part of its very make-up and construction. This kind of ambiguity is a large part of what makes this play (and al-Hakim's writing more generally) so rich.

The way that the book itself was published – with a long explanatory introduction, followed by the text, followed by a discussion of the text in French by a Swiss scholar, followed by al-Hakim's rebuttal of that discussion – is important. The play itself was not presented as a finished product but as the result of a deliberation. Then, after reading the play we do not reach finality but there must then be further deliberation.<sup>118</sup> The whole text carries a sense of performativity with it. Sections react to each other and enter into debate with other sections.

The book, as a whole, enacts a conversation between different views and, in doing so, looks at different ways to create the Egyptian theatre tradition that al-Hakim is searching for. In part, this is something that is built into Tawfiq al-Hakim's concept of theatre of the mind. The book becomes the site of performance rather than the stage and this is something that he developed in this instance.

The actual play-text itself could, therefore, be seen simply as a failure if it is not seen as part of a larger whole. It is part of the herculean task that al-Hakim has taken on: creating an Arabic dramatic literature. However, he is under no illusions that he can accomplish this simply with one play. Rather, it is a project that requires steps, missteps and re-writings. The book *Oedipus the King* shows us some of these steps and missteps, along with the criticism of the work to produce an important artefact.

Al-Hakim himself said that he was moving beyond the simple translation of Abyad and his generation. However, in the way that this book has a theatrical quality, it is involved in a similar process. Al-Hakim is not so much writing a play in an Egyptian model but using the translation or adaptation of *Oedipus* to test competing ideas against each other. In chapter one I argued that it was performance that shaped the Egyptian tradition rather than the other way around. In his theatre of the mind al-Hakim has created a theatrical text that highlights, rather than ignoring or effacing, the different forces that come to the fore in making an Egyptian *Oedipus* – and perhaps in making an Egyptian theatre.

The final paragraph in the book sums up the failure that is inherent in the entire project:

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<sup>118</sup> It would, therefore, be interesting to know whether Aloys de Marignac's criticism was "genuine" or whether it is really a part of this process of creation and criticism.

So, all we have done is tried something difficult and we know full well that failure [*al-ikhfāq*] awaits us at the end of the road. Indeed the greatest reward is sometimes the work itself, not the result. What a great reward is the one I have attained and the fruit which has fallen on me, just by staying a few years in the shade of that ancient tree, always green and fertile: The tragedies of Sophocles.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 222.

## **Chapter Five: Ali Ahmed Bakathir's Islamic Oedipus**

In the introduction to his *Oedipus the King*, Tawfiq al-Hakim considered the question of why Ancient Greek theatre never had ever taken hold in the Arab world. A number of scholars, he said, “claim that Islam is what prevented the acquisition [*iqtibās*] of this pagan [*wathaniyya*] art.” He did not elaborate on the details of these arguments but he did make sure to state categorically that he was not of the same opinion, citing *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and the *Shahnameh* as examples of pagan works that happily came into Arabic literature. Nevertheless, there remains a sense in much scholarship that theatre as a genre, and particularly polytheistic Greek tragedy, stands in conflict with Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

Many critics point to the uneasy attitude towards (perhaps stretching to a prohibition of) the representation of humans in the Islamic tradition. Theatre, the argument continues, is a form of representation and therefore is problematic in an Islamic tradition of art and this assumption lies behind much of the work on theatre's place in the Islamic tradition. Once one looks more closely at the actual Islamic arguments about theatre it becomes clear that this explanation alone cannot tell us very much about the terms of the debate, especially as it was developed in the twentieth century. Although there were some people who did (and do) oppose theatricality on an Islamic basis, it is seldom, if ever, due to the simple idea of representing God's creation in physical form.

Ali Ahmed Bakathir's 1949 adaptation of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, explicitly turns the story of Oedipus into a proto-Islamic tale and gives us an Islamic solution to Oedipus' problems. This *Tragedy of Oedipus* [*Ma 'sāt Ūdīb*] offers the opportunity to work through Islamic debates around theatricality and Islamic engagements with polytheistic Greek mythology from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. It allows us, also, to complicate simplistic views about the place of these two things in an Islamic context.

Bakathir's *Tragedy of Oedipus*, like Tawfiq al-Hakim's play, made several radical changes to the story. This chapter examines the religious issues of repentance and correct governance that Bakathir explores in his adaptation, while also interrogating allegorical readings of Egyptian drama. Allegory has often been seen as a second-rate form of literary criticism but it is one that is extremely prominent in Egyptian theatre. Using the work of

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<sup>1</sup> al-Hakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 20.

Benjamin and others, I propose that Bakathir's play can be used to add nuance to discussions of allegory in twentieth century Egyptian literature.

### Islam and Drama

Peter Chelkowski, in his article 'Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre', complained that "many scholars [have been led] to the simplistic conclusion that Islam was completely antagonistic to drama and the theatre." Their primary argument for this view is usually that Islam prohibits artistic representation of living things. As they were the creations of God, humans should not try to imitate this creation. This reasoning is usually connected to a prohibition on making pictures and sculptures but it is logically extended to include theatrical representation too. Chelkowski mentioned the "strong and consistent objections of Islamic theologians to the representational arts".<sup>2</sup> Others have talked of "the position taken by many conservative religious scholars in the region that Islam did not allow imitation of the human form... In theatre [this] led to shadow theatre and single person narratives [rather than 'European-style' theatre]".<sup>3</sup>

This argument, connecting a prohibition on making images to theatrical representation, is frequently raised or hinted at. However, it does not seem to have seriously concerned theatre practitioners in late nineteenth or twentieth century Egypt. In part this may be because the Islamic prohibition on making images [*taṣwīr*] was not a prominent issue at the time. In 1904 Muhammad Abduh, a leading religious scholar, published an article in the journal *al-Manār* arguing against any such prohibition. "The discussion [about *taṣwīr*] comes from pagan times and the images were made for two reasons, the first was amusement [*al-lahw*] and the second was to get blessings from the statue of whichever one of the righteous was depicted [*al-tabarruk bi-timthāl man tursam ṣūratuhu min al-ṣāliḥīn*]." Both vain amusement and blessings from graven images were against the teachings of Islam but now, Abduh argued, the religious position regarding these images had changed. People did not connect statues to pagan worship any more, so the second charge had been answered. Images were now being used for positive benefit [*fā'ida*], such as teaching good morals via example, answering the first charge. Images, according to Abduh were like poems. They were repositories of a beneficial culture. "Drawing is a kind of poetry that you see and do not hear

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Chelkowski, 'Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre', *Die Welt Des Islams* 23/24 (1984): 45–69. Quotes from 45.

<sup>3</sup> Don Rubin, *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre. vol. 4, The Arab World* (London: Routledge, 1999), 11.



and poetry is a kind of drawing that you hear and do not see.” One might add to this that theatre can be both.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this, it is not necessary to logically equate images and theatrical representation. One of the most common and most detailed prophetic hadith used against *taṣwīr* clearly ties the images to a physical object, in someone’s home: the angels will not enter a house that has a dog or a picture [*ṣūra*].<sup>5</sup> Although it would be logically possible to extend those arguments to the theatre, it does not seem that this connection between representation and drama was any more prominent in Islamic critiques than it was in Christian ones.<sup>6</sup>

People who disagreed with the whole fundamental concept of drama from an Islamic perspective were rare but they did exist. One famous case, but one in which the details are slightly unclear, is the expulsion of Abu Khalil al-Qabbani’s troupe from Damascus. In 1884, after complaints from ulama in Damascus about al-Qabbani’s performances the Sultan issued a decree banning al-Qabbani from acting in the city and he went to Egypt to continue his work.

The precise reasons for the complaints are unclear but worries about *taṣwīr* are not part of them. It is usually seen as a religiously conservative reaction against unpalatable things being displayed on the stage (especially the romantic scenes), rather than the medium of theatre itself.<sup>7</sup> However, due to a lack of clear evidence many competing stories exist for the deeper reasons behind the ban. One member of the troupe is quoted as saying that the complaints came from wives whose husbands were spending time in the theatre and away from home or from bosses whose workers were neglecting their work for the theatre, not for religious objections to acting *per se*.<sup>8</sup> Saadallah Wannus, the Syrians playwright, went further and used this incident to argue that al-Qabbani’s theatre, both in the subjects that he showed and the

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<sup>4</sup> *al-Manār* VII, 1904, 35-9. Quotes from 36 and 35. Ahmad Muhammad Isa, ‘Muslims and Taswir’, *The Muslim World* 45 (1955): 250–68. Translated into English by Harold Glidden, this article first appeared in Arabic in *Majallat al-Azhar* in 1951 and sums up the Islamic debate on *taṣwīr*.

<sup>5</sup> Isa, ‘Muslims and Taswir’, 253.

<sup>6</sup> For a history of Christian Anti-Theatricality see e.g: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theatre* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1960); John Witherspoon and Samuel Miller, *A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage: And a Letter Respecting Play Actors* (New York: Whiting & Watson, 1812); Laura Levine, ‘Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642’, *Criticism* 28, no. 2 (1986): 121–43.

<sup>7</sup> Sayyid ‘Alī Ismā‘īl, *Tārīkh al-masrah fī Miṣr fī-l-qarn al-tāsi* ‘*ashar* [*The History of Theatre in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century*] (Cairo: Zahra’ al-Sharq, 1997), 158. Najm, *The Play in Modern Arabic Literature*, 66-68. In Najm he merely states that it is al-Qabbani’s troupe that is banned from acting not theatre as a whole. The information in Ismā‘īl’s text is less conclusive in that respect.

<sup>8</sup> Ismā‘īl, *The History of Theatre*, 158-9. His source is the magazine *al-Muṣawwar*, vol. 720, 29 July, 1937.

communal nature of spectatorship, was a threat to the autocratic power structures of the Ottoman empire and its religious establishment. This, he felt, was the real reason for their objections.<sup>9</sup>

If the details of this case are hard to pin down, a fuller debate on Islamic perspectives on the theatre can be found in the Syrian magazine *al-Ḥaqā'iq* in 1911. A reader of the magazine had been to see a performance of a play called *Zuhayr al-Andalusī* [Zuhayr the Andalusian] at a school in Damascus, written by 'Arif al-Shihabi. At the time of the performance al-Shihabi declared that theatre was “a religious obligation present in the Quran” [*farḍ jā' fi-l-Qur'ān*] because it could shape society's morals for the better. The reader who wrote to the journal had watched the performance with pleasure and, since he noticed some religious scholars in the audience, apparently enjoying it too, he believed that he was doing a good religious deed. He was, therefore, very shocked when he turned up to Friday prayer to see the imam deliver a scathing attack on the play – and theatre in general – in his sermon. The confused reader sent a letter to the magazine asking for clarification over this thorny religious question and they invited scholars to contribute their opinions.<sup>10</sup>

The scholars unanimously condemned theatre as un-Islamic in a variety of ways but the issue of *taṣwīr* and representation did not feature here as it had not featured in criticisms of al-Qabbani's troupe. In fact, their arguments were remarkably similar to other anti-theatrical debates throughout history. Their criticism especially singled out the falsehood on which theatricality and acting were inherently based. Critics also worried about the Europeanisation that theatre might bring or the feminisation of the boys or young men who might act female roles. In so far as they connected their criticism to any specifically Islamic arguments, they tended to stress the danger of the insults and jokes that appeared on stage. The scholars worried that theatre promoted mockery [*sukhriyya*] and, even more, that it could constitute a form of back-biting or slander [*ghība*] – a serious offence in the Islamic tradition.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Sa'd Allah Wannūs “li-mādhā waqafat al-raj'iyya ʿidda Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī” [Why did the Forcess of Reaction Stand against Abu Khalil al-Qabbani] in al-Khatīb, *Nazariyyat al-Masrah*, vol. 2, 981-999. Pg. 937-999 in this collection collect a number of articles about al-Qabbani's expulsion from Damascus.

<sup>10</sup> The debate spreads between *al-Ḥaqā'iq* vol. 2, No.1-7 (1911) and is reprinted in al-Khatīb, *Nazariyyat al-Masrah*, vol. 1, 173–223. For more information on *al-Ḥaqā'iq* see David Dean Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 116–23.

<sup>11</sup> al-Khatīb, *Nazariyyat al-Masrah*, vol. 1, 217-23 gives the magazine's own summary of the long debate. For a later example of the same thing Aḥmad ibn al-Ṣadīq al-Ghumārī, *Iqāmat al-Dalīl 'alā Ḥurmat al-Tamthīl* [Establishing the Evidence for the Prohibition of Acting] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 2004). I have the third edition from 2004. Elias Mohanna noted in a lecture at the al-Waleed

In Egypt, it was more common to try to fit theatre into a religious framework that already existed. Part of the reason that the critiques of theatre in *al-Ḥaqā'iq* stretched over so many pages is al-Shihabi's claim that his theatre was a religious obligation, because it could help perfect morals. Many of the critics picked up angrily on his attempt to incorporate theatre into an Islamic domain, a domain that perhaps they felt they controlled. In many ways, this entrenchment of their political power was probably just as much of a motive as purely religious (if such a thing could exist) considerations. "It is an act of disbelief [*min al-mukaffirāt*] to call something Halal, which is Haram," said one. Misleading people into thinking that what was religiously forbidden (Haram) was in fact permitted (Halal) was particularly dangerous. In the sermon, which provoked the reader's fears (later reproduced in the magazine), Hassan al-Istawani was, again, particularly angry that "the Haram has been dressed in the clothes of the Halal and schools of religion and knowledge have become stages for the transmission of corruption and error."<sup>12</sup>

Although widely dismissed by the scholars in *al-Ḥaqā'iq*, the view that theatre should be encouraged from an Islamic perspective because it could perfect the morals of society was important. It entered into the same ground as Muhammad Abduh's first critique against images and their status as empty entertainment [*al-lahw*]. Useless diversions were religiously questionable but the theatre could be a positive good if it was of some use [*fā'ida*] and not just a frivolity, or worse, a place of debauchery.

In Egypt, particularly, the argument that theatre was, in its basic essence, forbidden did not seem to hold much purchase amongst theatre practitioners and religious objections were seldom raised. One of the first Egyptian plays, performed in 1872, was written by a Sheikh at the religious institution al-Azhar.<sup>13</sup> The scholars in *al-Ḥaqā'iq* were involved in a set of complex religious debates, many of which were particularly playing out in Egypt at the time. Mukhtar al-Mu'ayyid, from Medina, writing in the *al-Ḥaqā'iq* debate, mocked the laxity of Egyptian religious morals. He was annoyed that, during the course of their debate, a

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Centre, University of Edinburgh 2011 entitled 'Theatre and Islamic Tradition: Prohibition of human representation in Arts and its complexity' that the book was first published in 1952. It argues against the concept of theatre *in itself*, relying on many of the same arguments: that acting is a kind of falsehood, that it is a western, non-Muslim import, that it is a frivolity that drags Muslim youth away from their proper path. It also has some more esoteric arguments: that the false beards worn in performance make fun of the bearded, who are following an Islamic tradition. However, he does not use the argument that theatre is a kind of *taṣwīr*. The author notes in his introduction that his is not a mainstream opinion but laments that fact.

<sup>12</sup> al-Khatīb, *Nazarīyyāt al-Masrah*, vol. 1, 191, 186. Commins, *Islamic Reform* looks into the political background of these debates.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Sadgrove, 'Leyla - The First Egyptian Tragedy', *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 7, no. 7–8 (1988).

magazine called *al-Rā'id* had defended theatre citing the views of so-called “enlightened scholars” [*al-‘ulamā’ al-mutanawwirūn*]. Al-Mu’ayyid cynically retorted that “they do not mean the enlightened scholars that you [the other scholars] have been quoting from but those who have travelled to Egypt or Europe and whose minds have been ‘enlightened’ by eating carrion, strangled animals and pig’s meat.”<sup>14</sup>

These attacks on theatre reveal two important things. The first is that the apparently Islamic taboo about representation of human forms was not a major concern when it came to the theatre. The second is that, by reading against the grain of these fierce criticisms of the theatre, we can see that there was also a movement to promote theatre on religious grounds. People had even argued that it was a religious imperative. Furthermore, in many ways, the religious arguments for theatre were hardly different from secular arguments. Theatre could certainly be dangerous, but, if done correctly, it could also improve the morals of the viewers and be a great benefit for the community.

As the twentieth century continued debates in the theatre centred much more around exactly how it could be used for the benefit of society, rather than whether it should be performed at all. In the 30s and 40s specifically Islamic-orientated theatre gained prominence. One of the most important figures in this movement was ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Banna (also called al-Sa‘ati), brother of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Hassan al-Banna [1906-1949], who founded a Muslim Brotherhood affiliated troupe and wrote several plays for it through the 1940s. He “aimed at creating the Islamic theatre ... in order to show the glories of Islam and to praise the deeds of the heroes and the great occasions of Muslim history.”<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, Bakathir was part of this tradition. He sought to write plays with a message for the Muslim or a message about Islam. His *Tragedy of Oedipus* is rooted in Islamic thought, more than anything else.

### Islam and the Greeks

Whatever the general attitude to theatre, the polytheistic Greek element of *Oedipus Tyrannos* risked making the play more problematic. Ahmed Etman argued that “from ancient times, then, Greek pagan myths represented the main impediment for Arab Muslims to absorb

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<sup>14</sup> al-Khatīb, *Naẓariyyāt al-Masrah*, vol. 1, 198. It is forbidden under Islamic law to eat carrion, animals that have been killed by strangulation and pork. Al-Mu’ayyid, therefore, saw Egypt as particularly irreligious.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Abd al-Fattāh ‘Uwaysī, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question, 1928-1947* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998), 129. ‘

Greek poetry.”<sup>16</sup> Etman’s example for his claim was Sulayman al-Bustani’s *Iliad* and he noted especially that the long subtitle of al-Bustani’s translation shied away from mentioning any kind of ‘myth’, even of mentioning the word itself. From this, he concluded that “until the publication date in 1904, men of letters in the Arab world did not have the courage to deal with mythology so openly.”<sup>17</sup> The Greek pantheon of gods and rituals of idol worship could sit uncomfortably with anyone who adhered strictly to monotheistic Islamic doctrines, not just Etman. This is something that needed to be considered when translating or adapting Greek theatre or literature in Egypt

However, as with anti-theatricality, there is a danger of exaggerating the nervousness about adapting polytheistic myths into Arabic. Al-Bustani did dedicate several pages to a discussion of myth and polytheism in his introduction. He admitted that, in the early days of Islam there was a risk that the pagan concepts within the *Iliad* could corrupt the belief of early Muslims. However, like Muhammad Abduh, he did not see that risk as significant in the early twentieth century. In fact, he observed that, by the time of the Abbasid Caliphate, the Islamic community was willing to accept Greek learning and culture, even speculating that if the Abbasid Caliphate or the rule of al-Ma’mun had lasted longer we would have some examples of Arabic Homer from the period. He cited, like Tawfiq al-Hakim after him, the *Shahnameh* as an example of pagan literature translated into Arabic and used it to argue there was no special prohibition on pagan literature. He thought that the likely reasons for the *Iliad* not being translated into Arabic were more mundane: the existence of a poetic tradition in Arabic already which did not need to take anything from ancient Greece and the difficulty of rendering Homer in good, poetic Arabic.<sup>18</sup>

There may be something to Etman’s argument that al-Bustani tried to play down the pagan element of his work but it is clear that his translation did not make any attempt to remove it entirely. The more interesting question that we should ask is not why mythology is or is not absent but how Arabic writers and translators dealt with polytheistic mythology when they actually did present it to an Arabic speaking audience.

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Etman, ‘Translation at the Intersection of Traditions: The Arab Reception of the Classics’ in Hardwick and Stray, *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, 141–52. For mythology particularly see 145–49. Quote from 146.

<sup>17</sup> Etman ‘Translation at the Intersection of Traditions’, 146.

<sup>18</sup> al-Bustānī, *Iliad*, 65–67.

Al-Tahtawi's *Télémaque* and al-Haddad's *The Terrible Secret*

The earliest book to deal at length with ancient Greek myth in Arabic in this period was Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Tahtawi's [1801-1873] translation of Fénelon's *Télémaque*, first published in Beirut in 1867 but primarily written during his exile in Sudan from 1850-54.<sup>19</sup> Fénelon's work is a moralistic epic which follows Telemachus, son of Ulysses (Odysseus), around the ancient Greek world in search of his father. Due to the nature of the plot and the presence of gods and divinities, al-Tahtawi was forced to think seriously about how he would render polytheism in his translation.

His choices have been examined closely by Shehu Ahmed Galadanci's PhD thesis.<sup>20</sup> Galadanci uses as a basis for his analysis al-Tahtawi's statement that, in his translation, he was obliged to "follow the syntactical rules of the Arabic Language and its accepted beliefs."<sup>21</sup> For Galadanci, following "accepted beliefs" included altering references to pagan gods to make them fit a monotheistic conception of the world:

As the original text of *Les Aventures de Télémaque* is full of Greek mythology neither acceptable nor understood by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's readers he thought it necessary to change all the Olympian gods and other supernatural beings mentioned in the book... So he substituted God as understood by his readers for the [Greek] celestial beings.<sup>22</sup>

Galadanci's thesis goes on to analyse one specific passage, pointing out all the ways that the translation had been Islamised.<sup>23</sup> He notes eight particular changes that the Arabic makes to the French text, among them are several religiously motivated alterations: "Jupiter is translated as "Almighty God", "the Lord of Lords" etc." and "The polytheistic idea in the original text has been removed. All the celestial deities and immortals, with the exception of Jupiter are translated into people." As well as changing pagan elements, he also introduces

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<sup>19</sup>Rifā'ah Rāfi' Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Mawāqī' al-Aflāk fī Waqā'i' Ṭilīmāk* [*The Positions of the Heavens in the Tale of Telemachus*] (Beirut: Maṭba'ah al-Sūriyya, 1867); François de Salignac de La Mothe- Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque: Fils d'Ulysse* (Philadelphia: Haswell, Barrington & Haswell, 1839). See also Eve Troutt-Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 47–55 for details of his time in Sudan and a discussion of the book.

<sup>20</sup> Shehu Aḥmad Galadanci, 'Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873) and the Cultural Impact of France' (PhD. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1969). Esp. 107–27.

<sup>21</sup> al- Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Ṭilīmāk*, 23 (Galadanci's translation).

<sup>22</sup> Galadanci, *Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> Galadanci, *Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī*, 112–19. He compares 3 paragraphs at the beginning of Book 17 in Fénelon with the corresponding section in Tahtawi. See Fénelon, *Télémaque*, 279–80 and al-Tahtawi, *Ṭilīmāk*, 505–06.

more Islamic elements “without justification”. Perhaps the most striking change is what he does with the last sentence in the section quoted by Galadanci. The French text reads “Tous les dieux en silence continuaient à regarder le combat.” However, in Arabic al-Tahtawi has completely removed this sentence, in all its polytheism, and replaced it with a long section of Islamic-style theology with no connection at all to the French.<sup>24</sup>

A wider reading of the text, however, shows that al-Tahtawi’s translation of Greek gods was more complex than Galadanci gives him credit for. We can find several examples of al-Tahtawi maintaining the pagan vocabulary and imagery. For instance, at the beginning of book 9, Venus is plotting against Telemachus because he has resisted all the charms of love so plots with Neptune to alter his ship’s course. Tahtawi did not shy away from reproducing the tale here in its “pagan” form. Venus is translated as *Zuhra*, Jupiter is *Birjīs al-Mushtarī*, Neptune is *Nābtūn Sulṭān al-Baḥr*, and Cupid is, quite charmingly, “The Messenger of Passion” (*Rasūl al-Gharām*).<sup>25</sup>

Galadanci complains that al-Tahtawi did not offer any explanation for his decisions regarding translations of ancient Greek religious terms. Strictly speaking, this was true but he did devote some discussion to his views on Greek religion more generally. In his introduction, he noted that many ancient societies were pagan. His explanation for this was that it came from their lack of intellectual development. In ancient Greece he traces a path from a worship of the stars and planets to a more comprehensive polytheistic religion. However, there was nothing unusual or unique about this. He argued that it was characteristic of all early societies, noting that when the Europeans discovered America they also found paganism in this so-called ‘primitive’ society.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Tahtawi then separated Greek mythological stories into two strands: the allegorical (*al-bawāṭin*) and the literal (*al-ḥawāḥir*). For instance, al-Tahtawi interpreted the myth of Saturn eating his children as an allegorical way of saying that time destroys everything, thus defusing its paganism. The literal meanings (*al-ḥawāḥir*) of pagan religion, such as genuine belief in multiple gods, were also not as problematic for al-Tahtawi as people might have assumed. Using arguments that later scholars like Muhammad Abduh would take up, he reasoned that since there was no serious risk of ‘primitive’ pagan religion taking hold again in

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<sup>24</sup> al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Tilīmāk*, 506 reads “Allah filled up the tongues of his creation with speech so that people might understand its many meanings and senses. Every human scrutinises the things that carried in them his forethought, and those to which his will had been attached and what he had decreed good or ill and they imitate them and are satisfied.”

<sup>25</sup> al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Tilīmāk*, 250–53.

<sup>26</sup> al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Tilīmāk*, 25–26.

Egypt “it is not necessary for anyone to try to get rid of it, nor to correct it, nor to extinguish its weak light, it has no substance, nor does its mention engender worry or grief.”<sup>27</sup>

He did not mind explaining some of the pagan beliefs to his audience if it would help them understand the literature. When talking about the practice of swearing an oath on running water, for instance, he said that it is “one of the beliefs of that ignorant age”. When describing the moon he said that “it resembles [...] the goddess of chastity for the Arabs and that the Greeks call it the god of woods and call him Diana or call it Hecate.”<sup>28</sup>

Al-Tahtawi’s text does not simply expunge paganism from the story but it sends contradictory messages, sometimes removing it and other times happily including it. This makes it hard to propose a simple model for his engagement with polytheism.

We can also see a similar relationship develop between Islamic language and the polytheism of ancient Greece in versions of *Oedipus Tyrannos*. When the play first came to the Arabic stage in Egypt it was also adorned with the language of Islamic monotheism. At the beginning of the production of al-Haddad’s translation of Voltaire’s *Oedipe Roi* in 1900, a chorus of priests enters, singing a song replete with contemporary religious vocabulary:

اغفر للذنوب يا اله الناس  
فرج الكروب وانف عن البأس. أمان  
نيسط الايادي بالدعا المجاب  
الرحمن هادي من له اناب. أمان<sup>29</sup>

Forgive us our sins, God of the people.

Drive out our worries and banish our ills. Safety.

We spread out our hands in supplication that will be answered.

The merciful [God] is a guide for those who seek refuge in him. Safety

The first line places us in a strictly Abrahamic, specifically Islamic, setting. The opening imprecation for God to forgive sins is markedly Abrahamic and then the designation “God of

<sup>27</sup> al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Tilīmāk*, 26–27. Quote from 26.

<sup>28</sup> al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Tilīmāk*, 541; 543.

<sup>29</sup> al-Ḥaddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 3.



the people” [*ilāh al-nās*] is directly taken from the Quran.<sup>30</sup> Moving on from here, much of the rest of the song is also very “Islamic” in tone, as are the rest of the songs. For instance, the use of *al-raḥmān* (the merciful) to refer to God here or the use of another Islamic designation, *al-qahhār*, (the conquering) in another song put the lyrics in a religious context.<sup>31</sup>

Interpretation of the play is made more complicated by the fact that the songs were added by the troupe and not the author but, when it comes to al-Haddad’s translation of Voltaire’s text, we see a mix of polytheistic and monotheistic language. Take his translation of *les dieux*. Sometimes al-Haddad was willing to call gods gods [*al-āliha*]. At other times he simply translated *les dieux* as *Allah*.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to isolate exactly his reasoning in each case, and it is not made easier by the fact that Voltaire himself uses *les dieux* and *le ciel* seemingly synonymously. But one can make a few observations.

Al-Haddad’s text used *al-āliha* more often than *Allah*.<sup>33</sup> In situations when it would be religiously problematic or confusing, al-Haddad tended to choose *al-āliha* rather than *Allah*, such as when people in the play have direct contact with the divine, asking questions or receiving revelation.<sup>34</sup> In more conventional situations, by contrast, it was possible to say *Allah*, such as when Oedipus talks to his people about “your prayers to God” [*du ‘ā’ukum lillah*]. Still, any attempt to make his usage of different words fit a simple pattern seems impossible.<sup>35</sup>

In both al-Haddad’s *The Terrible Secret* and in al-Tahtawi’s *Télémaque*, the language of Islamic religion is mixed with the language of polytheism and the two become hard to separate. When the polytheistic ancients begin to speak like modern monotheists, it might be seen as a way of Islamising – and therefore defusing – polytheistic beliefs. Or, it could be something more complex. As well as Islamising polytheism, this process also introduces polytheism into Islamic language, enmeshing the Islamic and the polytheistic and, necessarily, raising issues for the reader about what really separates the two.

<sup>30</sup> Quran 114:3. As we shall see later Bakathir also introduces this idea of a forgiving God, anachronistically, to the Oedipus story.

<sup>31</sup> For the reference to *al-qahhār* see al-Haddad *Oedipus*, 19. *Al-raḥmān* and *al-qahhār* are 2 of the 99 names of Allah and *al-raḥmān* is one of the most common, being part of the bismillah.

<sup>32</sup> al-Haddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 13, 43.

<sup>33</sup> *al-Āliha* occurs 47 times. *Allah* occurs 25 times. The singular *al-ilāh* occurs 11 times.

<sup>34</sup> al-Haddād, *The Terrible Secret*, 12 the priest says “the gods have revealed to me...” [*awḥat ilayya al-āliha...*]. To say that *Allah* had revealed something to him might be jarring or problematic. Similarly, 46 Philoctetes, says “Ask the gods about me” [*is ‘al al-āliha ‘anī*].

<sup>35</sup> One might think that he generally used the word *Allah* commonly used phrases that use it in Arabic (e.g. *Billahi* [by God], on 44). However, when it comes to a common phrase like *Sallimtu al-‘amr ilā Allah* [I’ve handed the matter over to God] al-Haddad uses *al-āliha*. Sometimes he simply leaves the gods out of the translation when they are present in the French. See: 38)

It is with this point in mind that the chapter now approaches Bakathir's adaptation of Oedipus. This consciously Islamic adaptation of the pagan myth, struggles with the issue of how we can know what is religiously correct in a play where polytheism and paganism infuse everything; how we can avoid the very confusion that arises in both of these nineteenth century translations of Greek religion.

### Ali Ahmed Bakathir's *Tragedy of Oedipus*

Bakathir's 1949 *Tragedy of Oedipus* was, in many ways, the product of this genealogy and these debates about the place of both theatre and Greek religion in Islam. Bakathir took up the mantle of a playwright whose theatre could influence the audience and promote Islamic values, rather than be simple entertainment. In his *Tragedy of Oedipus*, he pointed the way towards a more Islamically based society. He also used his play to explicitly work through the implicit tension that was present in any attempt to translate pagan religion into Islamic language. The mixing of polytheism and Islam became a central focus and the question: how can we identify true religion when its boundaries are so porous and other religions speak the same language?

Bakathir's life was spent across the Islamic world, not only in Egypt. He was born in 1910 in Indonesia to Yemeni parents and, in 1920, at the age of 9, his family moved back to Yemen. He then moved around Yemen and Saudi Arabia, occasionally returning to Indonesia, until 1934 when he moved to Egypt. From 1934 until 1938 he was enrolled at a course in English Literature at Cairo University. After getting a teaching qualification, he went to teach English, History and Geography in a school in the Egyptian Delta town of Mansoura in 1940. He returned to Cairo in 1947 and spent most of the rest of his life there until his death in 1969.<sup>36</sup>

His early education was in the tradition of Classical Arabic literature rather than the European "classics". When he came to Egypt in 1934 he had already memorised the Quran and a considerable amount of Arabic poetry.<sup>37</sup> He was also known for his strong support for Palestinian-Arab cause, writing several plays, long and short, about it during the 1940s. Between 1945 and 1948 he wrote around 50 one act plays for the Muslim Brotherhood journal

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<sup>36</sup> This timeline is based on Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd's longer timeline of his life Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd, *Abḥāth Mu'tamar: 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr wa-Makānatuhu al-Adabiyya. vol. 1: Masrah 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr [Conference Proceedings: Ali Ahmed Bakathir and his Place in Literature. vol. 1.: The Theatre of Ali Ahmed Bakathir]* (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 2010), 11–15. (henceforth 'The Theatre of Ali Ahmed Bakathir').

<sup>37</sup> 'Abbās Khaḍar, 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr Kama 'Araftuhu [Ali Ahmed Bakathir as I Knew Him], in 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr *Fī Mirāt 'aṣrihi*, ed. Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1990), 59–68.

*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* many of which were about Palestine. The plays in the journal were frequently set behind closed doors in places like the UN, Downing Street, the White House or somewhere called the “Palace of Israel” in Tel Aviv and the action often involves back-door foreign plans to dominate the Middle East or support the Jewish side in Palestine.<sup>38</sup>

Although he came from a tradition deeply rooted in Arabic literature and tradition, Bakathir did not ignore European theatre. In a class at Cairo University he listened with irritation as his teacher informed him that the English language had a unique capacity for expression in blank verse [*al-shi‘r al-mursal*]. The French had tried and failed to replicate it, he said. What upset Bakathir more was the teacher’s claim that it neither existed nor could it exist (successfully) in Arabic. Not wanting to submit to this slight on the Arabic language, Bakathir took on the challenge and in 1936 he published a translation of *Romeo and Juliet* into blank verse.<sup>39</sup>

When Bakathir came to adapt *Oedipus Tyrannos* into Arabic it was as a work of ‘world literature’, not specifically as Greek. He did not approach the text like Taha Hussein or Tawfiq al-Hakim as a part of a heritage that could be claimed by Arabic writers but as an ancient Greek literary tradition that was separate from his own. This is not to say that Bakathir thought of everything non-Islamic was separate from his own tradition. In 1958 he says that “the ancient history [of the Arab world] is part of its general history [*al-ta’rīkh al-‘amm*]” and that writers should not shy away from including the glories of the ancients in with the glory of the Arab people. However, he does not seem to consider the Greek as part of this Arabic history. With Bakathir, we have an Oedipus that sidesteps the arguments of Taha Hussein and sees this play as something foreign to translate into Arabic.<sup>40</sup>

Bakathir’s *Tragedy of Oedipus* was the last of the four Oedipuses of 1949 mentioned in the previous chapter. Ahmed Shams al-Din al-Haggagi is suspicious of the timing of Bakathir’s decision to publish his adaptation of the play, accusing him of copying Tawfiq al-Hakim’s idea. He says that “Bakathir followed al-Hakim’s path step by step. Al-Hakim

<sup>38</sup> The journal *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* is very difficult to track down but 10 plays from the series were reprinted in ‘Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr, *Masrah al-Siyāsa: Tamthīlāt Siyāsiyya: Taṣwīr Fannī li-l-Kifāh al-‘Arabī al-Islāmī Didda al-Isti‘mār* [Political Theatre: Political Plays: Artistic Depiction of the Arab-Islamic Struggle against Imperialism] (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, n.d.).

<sup>39</sup> ‘Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr, *Fann al-Masrahiyya: Min Khilāl Tajāribi al-Shakhṣiyya* [The Art of the Play: From My Personal Experience] (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, n.d.), 6–11.

<sup>40</sup> Bākathīr, *The Art of The Play*, 41–44 He names a large number of civilisations: Pharaonic, Babylonian, Phoenician, Sabaeen etc. He also mentions great figures such as Hannibal or Zenobia (the closest he gets to a Greek character). However, he does not mention the Greeks or any unquestionably Greek figures.

composed *Oedipus the King* in 1949 and in the same year Bakathir composed his *Tragedy of Oedipus*.<sup>41</sup> The plays certainly do share many of the same concerns and could productively be read together. However, Bakathir's *Tragedy of Oedipus* has more differences than similarities to al-Hakim's text and should be read just as much in conjunction with Sophocles' text and with the political events of the time as it should be read as following the path of al-Hakim.

Like al-Hakim's play, though published in 1949, it was not acted, perhaps it was not even intended to be acted.<sup>42</sup> However, despite this lack of a performance, Bakathir did clearly see his *Tragedy of Oedipus* as an important part of his oeuvre, particularly as a play that could fit into a broader canon of world literature. In the same year that it was published in Arabic, work was begun on a French translation. The Cairo-based Algerian writer Ali al-Hammami did a large part of the translation before his death at the end of 1949 and it was edited for publication in *La Revue du Caire* of 1950 by Alexandre Papadopoulos, though only the first two acts appear to have been published.<sup>43</sup> Bakathir went as a representative to the Afro-Asian Writers conference in Tashkent in 1958 and took the opportunity to travel around Russia and Europe afterwards. In his published journal of the trip we recalls how he brought a French copy of the *Tragedy of Oedipus* with him, trying to get it translated into both German and Italian.<sup>44</sup> Of all his books, this was one that he saw as being most apt for translation and wider dissemination.

### *The Tragedy of Oedipus: Plot*

Like al-Hakim, Bakathir made several very significant changes to the story of Oedipus as will be clear from a brief outline of his version of events. It will be clear, too, that many of the same concerns motivate both adaptations. For instance, both texts reject the idea that the oracle condemning Oedipus before he was born could be anything but fabricated and both are also concerned with the ruling of a city and what a king's relationship to the people should be.

<sup>41</sup> al-Ḥajjājī, *Myth in Egyptian Theatre*, 26. On 27 he also notes that Bakathir's 1959 *Isis and Osiris* came just 4 years after Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Isis*.

<sup>42</sup> The only performance of it in Egypt that I can find is a radio play made at some point after his death. 'Ma'sāt Ūḏīb... 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr', Egyptian Television and Radio Union, Accessed 28 December, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVxW0NKcJZk>.

<sup>43</sup> *La Revue du Caire* November 1950 421–54, December 1950 15–35. I have not been able to locate a full French translation.

<sup>44</sup> Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd, *Yawmiyāt 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr fī Rūsīyya wa-l-Jumhūriyyāt al-Islāmiyya wa-Ūrūbā* [*Ali Ahmed Bakathir's Diaries in Russia, the Islamic Republics and Europe*] (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 2010). German: 69–70, Italian: 165. The introduction notes that it may not have been the al-Hammami & Papadopoulos translation that he was carrying around but a version he had done while on an education mission in Paris in 1954 (14).

The first act of *The Tragedy of Oedipus* is split into two scenes. The first scene opens with Creon and Jocasta lamenting the disease and (importantly) famine which has afflicted the city. They discuss, with worry, Oedipus' plans to confiscate funds from the temple to ease the famine. Oedipus enters and the conversation turns to the temple, whose priests Oedipus accuses of only being interested in money and not the people. After Creon has left, Oedipus and Jocasta talk further and it is revealed that they had not confronted the temple before because they were scared that the high priest would reveal their shared secret: that Oedipus had killed Laius, Jocasta's former husband. Jocasta had apparently been giving money to the temple in fear they would reveal this to the people, who might revolt. But this only strengthens Oedipus' resolve to confront the priests and increases his anger. "It would be wrong to live in your shade, Jocasta, if I do not return to the people their money and property."<sup>45</sup>

Then Oedipus reveals his other fear. The high priest, Loxias, has brought up the old "false" oracle that Laius' son would kill his father and marry his mother and he has claimed that Oedipus is that very child. Neither Oedipus nor Jocasta believe it but there is a worry at the back of Oedipus' mind as long as he does not know who his real parents are. Jocasta also worries that, even though she and Oedipus do not believe the story, the more credulous people might. Their conversation is interrupted when Creon announces the entry of the mysterious Tiresias, who, in this version, is a rogue priest, been expelled from the temple by the other priests.<sup>46</sup>

Tiresias is invited in to have a private conversation with Oedipus. He reveals that he was expelled from the temple for attacking the priests' greed and he supports Oedipus' plan to give their money to the people. However, he also reveals what Oedipus had feared: that he was in fact Laius and Jocasta's son. It takes Oedipus a little while to accept that Tiresias is telling the truth but (unlike in Sophocles) does by the end of the scene and collapses on the floor. "Woe on Oedipus", Tiresias says at the close of the scene "as long as he was striving with his eyes open, he was asleep. When he awoke he closed his eyes."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr, *Ma'sāt Ūdīb [The Tragedy of Oedipus]* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1949), 5–10. Quote from 10. It is slightly ambiguous whether the "money and property" are the people's or the temple's. Carlson & Bassiouny's translation suggests it is the temple's but since the temple is not actually mentioned in the sentence [*Ḥarām 'alayya al-'aysh fī ḡilliki 'in lam u'id li-l-sha'b amwālahu wa-amlākahu*] more likely the money and property rightfully belongs to the people not the temple.

<sup>46</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 10–19. Carlson & Bassiouny transliterate the name of the high-priest (which is not actually said on the pages), لوكسيايس, as Lucasias, though al-Hammami & Papadopoulou in *Revue du Caire* transliterate it "Loxias" (e.g. Nov. 1950, 442). I follow al-Hammami & Papadopoulou.

<sup>47</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 19–34. Quote from 34.

The next scene takes place the following day. It focuses around a discussion between Oedipus and Tiresias in the aftermath of Tiresias' revelation. Oedipus first thinks of suicide but cannot face even that, because it would mean meeting his father in the afterlife. Then, in a clear nod to Sophocles, Oedipus considers blinding himself. "Be careful" Tiresias retorts "of extinguishing with your own hands the light that you have been given to see the levelness of your path [*sawā' al-sabīl*]". Oedipus is convinced that he needs his sight to help his people. The solution that Tiresias comes up with is a very important step for the play. In an anachronistically Abrahamic way, Tiresias advises Oedipus that "the god<sup>48</sup> will have mercy on you and accept your repentance [*al-ilāhu sayarḥamuk wa-yaqbal tawbatak*]". Tiresias convinces Oedipus that he must continue in his mission to confiscate money from the temple priests, who are exploiting the religious beliefs of the people, and guide them to the true path. As the chapter discusses later, his discourse is markedly Islamic or proto-Islamic. The act closes with Oedipus resolved to reveal the truth to Jocasta.<sup>49</sup>

The second act belongs to Jocasta. It begins with her alone on stage before dawn, holding a candle. Oedipus has not in fact told her the truth of their relationship but he has not slept in her bed since he learnt the news, which is making her very worried. She confronts Tiresias, whom she identifies as the cause of Oedipus' mental state. She surmises (correctly) that Tiresias has convinced him to believe in the oracle. When Oedipus does come in and tries to tell Jocasta the truth she refuses to believe it. In a scene of Bakathir's invention, she looks at Oedipus and sees a young Laius in his place. Her hallucinations continue as she addresses her apparent dead husband but eventually she leaves the stage in anger, leaving the audience unsure exactly whether she has realised the truth of her situation or not. After her departure Tiresias supports Oedipus and Oedipus comforts his children, who are distressed at their mother's anguish, saying that she is taking bitter medicine but that it is for her own good.<sup>50</sup>

Once Jocasta is off stage, Loxias enters for the first time (but not before Oedipus has hidden some elders in the room to listen in on him). He says that he will reveal the oracle to the people and say that Oedipus is the cause of this disease and famine unless he gives up his plans to confiscate the temple's money and hands the rogue Tiresias back to the priests for trial. Oedipus refuses and Loxias leaves to announce the oracle to the people. When Jocasta

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<sup>48</sup> As will be discussed later, Tiresias uses very Islamic languages but never goes as far as to use the word Allah. I therefore translate his *al-ilāh* as "the god" rather than "God" but there are certainly monotheistic overtones in much of it.

<sup>49</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 35–37. Quotes from 37 and 38.

<sup>50</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 58–87.

finds out about Oedipus being her son she is ashamed (and finally accepts the truth) and so she hangs herself. With her dying words she says to Tiresias, “protect my son Oedipus from the cunning of the priests... don’t leave him Tiresias and may the god [*al-ilāh*] grant you victory”. The scene closes as Oedipus is preparing to face Loxias’ lies in front of the people.<sup>51</sup>

Jocasta, in Bakathir’s version, is given a more prominent role than in any other Egyptian versions, even more than in Sophocles’ version of the myth. Her figure has shades of Lady Macbeth, walking around the palace before dawn delivering a soliloquy or suffering vivid hallucinations; the references are not exact but, for a playwright who adapted many Shakespearean themes, the similarities are there to be found. We also get more of an insight into Jocasta’s life than in most versions of the play. In particular, she discusses her previous marriage to Laius at length and how he married her “before puberty had come to me” [*wa-lammā yudriknī al-ṭamth*].<sup>52</sup> When she sees Oedipus as a young Laius she imagines that he will leave her, now that she is old, and find a younger wife, as men so often do. She reveals, too, that Laius had an older wife before her, whom he left for the young Jocasta.<sup>53</sup>

The third act is also split into two scenes but the first is considerably longer than the second. It is set in front of the people and dramatizes the clash between the competing stories of Loxias (who claims that the false oracle and pollution is the reason for the people’s suffering) and Oedipus (who says that the people suffer because the temple is hoarding money). Oedipus does not try to deny the story of sleeping with his mother and killing his father but he does deny that it is a source of pollution in the city and alleges that Loxias invented the oracle for his own ends.

There is a moment when we feel the people could be manipulated to believe the temple priests but it quickly falls apart. As in al-Hakim’s, Bakathir’s play rejects the idea that the oracle could be divinely inspired and so attributes it to the scheming of the high priest. Bakathir, however, unlike al-Hakim, goes into minute details of how Loxias brought his plan about. He was first hired by Polybus (the rival king of Corinth) to make sure that Laius would have no heir. So he invents the oracle in order to scare him. When the child is handed to the shepherd, he intercepts it and gets it to Corinth. Then, after Oedipus has grown up with Polybus and Merope in Corinth, the high priest convinces a man called Pontus to say, in a supposedly loose-tongued drunken moment, that Oedipus is not his parents’ son. Through more complex

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<sup>51</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 87–109. Quote from 108.

<sup>52</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 70–71.

scheming, including a slightly implausible suggestion that Loxias' talk about the beauty of Oedipus' mother was a temptation dressed up as a warning, Loxias accomplishes the rest of the oracle. All of this is confirmed in front of the people and Loxias is condemned.<sup>54</sup>

In one last ditch gambit, Loxias attempts to release the Sphinx again to terrorise the people. However, Oedipus reveals that it is just a dummy with another priest inside, who would wait for people to faint in terror in front of it and then stab them. It had been instructed to collapse before Oedipus by Loxias. This time, when it comes out, Oedipus defeats it but it stands up again and in a symbolic moment, someone steps out from the ranks of 'the people' and solves the riddle (it only has one). In a triumph of democracy the people themselves defeat the beast threatening them (with the encouragement of Oedipus).<sup>55</sup>

Bakathir has tied up all the possible loose ends and, unlike al-Hakim's Oedipus, he did not have the problem that, even though the oracle was made up, it comes true anyway. He made sure to make Loxias the architect of everything. Then, as the scene ends the play moves towards a resolution. Loxias is expelled from the city, Tiresias is made head of the temple and Oedipus (despite some protestations on his part) remains king of the city. Polybus then announces that his enmity with the city is over and brings them food to ease the famine. Finally he says that he is merging the kingdoms of Corinth and Thebes and that Oedipus will be the new king. Joy is universal.<sup>56</sup>

However, the play is not allowed to finish on such a neat resolution. The last short scene sees Oedipus sneaking out of the palace by night to wander the world alone. As he leaves he is stopped by Tiresias. They have a tense exchange, in which it becomes clear that Oedipus still harbours some resentment for Tiresias' role in ruining his perfect life. Half-mad and accompanied by his daughter Antigone (again a nod to *Oedipus at Colonus*), he leaves the stage, parting with the words. "I am the past, Tiresias, and I am clearing the way for the future. I am despair, Tiresias, and I am going so that hope may come." This line becomes the second of the play's two epigraphs.<sup>57</sup>

### Islam and Ali Ahmed Bakathir's *Tragedy of Oedipus*

The first epigraph is a passage from the Quran:

وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

<sup>54</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 110–74.

<sup>55</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 162–66.

<sup>56</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 166–74 esp. 172–74.

<sup>57</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 175–85. Quote from 185.



إِنَّمَا يَأْمُرُكُمْ بِالسُّوءِ وَالْفَحْشَاءِ وَأَنْ تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

Follow not the footsteps of the devil. Lo! He is an open enemy for you.

He enjoineth upon you only the evil and the foul, and that ye should tell concerning God that  
which ye know not

Quran 2:168-169<sup>58</sup>

This quote is very carefully chosen. It encapsulates the central point that the play is making about religion. The first one and a half lines are important: one should take good care not be misled (follow the footsteps of the devil) into the evil and the foul. The crucial part, though, is the very end that warns about risk of “tell[ing] concerning Allah that which you know not.” Following the devil can lead to ascribing falsehoods to God. This play grapples with the question of how to know the truth of God when people all around you might be telling lies. Bakathir’s Oedipus, who is surrounded by polytheistic, false beliefs, must search out *true* righteousness and religion.

This difficulty was an implicit problem in earlier translations but it has become explicit in the plot of Bakathir’s *Tragedy of Oedipus*. Bakathir, in the 1940s did not have a problem translating Greek gods in Arabic, as Tahtawi had in the 1840s; such questions were no longer an issue. When Taha Hussein came to translate *Oedipus Tyrannos* in the 1930s he did not need the Islamic periphrases of al-Tahtawi. In 1932 Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi published his literary magazine *Apollo* [*Abūlū*], based on the Greek god’s position as a protector of the arts. The writer and critic ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad criticised Abu Shadi for naming his magazine after the god Apollo. His criticism was not on religious grounds but on the origin of the particular polytheistic god he chose. He should have named the magazine after the Chaldean god Utarid, said al-‘Aqqad, because that god was closer to Arabic heritage than Apollo.<sup>59</sup> In 1949, representing the polytheist Greeks on stage or in a script was widely accepted. In Bakathir’s adaptation, though, the conflict that, previously, was being played out under the surface in the translation of plays moves into the action itself. The complex relationship between polytheism and Islam, in a play is set in pre-Islamic times is a central theme in the *Tragedy of Oedipus*.

Oedipus is faced with the problem at the beginning of the play that people are prone to follow the religion of the state, whether it be right or wrong:

<sup>58</sup> Translation Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall.

<sup>59</sup> *Abūlū* September 1932, 54–55. Abū Shādī responds to al-‘Aqqād in 55–56.

Oedipus: Have mercy on these wretched people! They still believe in the temple [al-ma'bad] when their misery and ruin comes from the temple. What can the temple do for them? The temple has possessions and endowments [awqāf – an Islamic term for religious property] that distract them from the suffering of the people.

The temple is neglecting its religious duty and hoarding the money for itself thus, in fact, causing the famine and disease in Thebes. However, the people will not accept any criticism of their temple. Creon warns Oedipus about attacking the religion:

Creon: Have mercy Oedipus! Take care not so say that in front of anyone for the people will not see anyone on their country's throne who does not believe in their temple.<sup>60</sup>

This cynical manipulation of the people by the temple priests has led Oedipus to lose any kind of faith in religion. So, when the outcast temple priest, Tiresias, comes to visit him he assumes that the man who has attracted the hatred of the temple must be an atheist too. Tiresias surprises him by mentioning the god and Oedipus replies "god! [al-ilāh] Are you a believer in that lie [al-bāṭil] that the priests invented to eat up the people's money?" Tiresias, however, warns him in turn that "no-one denies the god but the ignorant and the arrogant."<sup>61</sup> Oedipus' first instinct when confronted with the corrupt temple was to abandon faith altogether, but Tiresias manages to convince him that there is another option. He should in fact embrace the true faith that the temple has distorted for its own ends.

The religion that Tiresias urges Oedipus towards is infused with Islamic references. In the introduction to her translation with Marvin Carlson, Dalia Basiouny says that one challenge they faced was Tiresias' language, "which is closely connected to the Qur'an and to philosophic/ religious debates about fate and destiny."<sup>62</sup> This is particularly clear, for example, in the Islamically-tinged language that Tiresias uses when he reveals to Oedipus that he is in fact Jocasta and Laius' son. Oedipus is, understandably, angry and blames the god for the oracle he has imposed on him. Tiresias warns him against this in decidedly Islamic terms: "here is that disbelief [kufr]. Oedipus, it is not right for a creature [makhlūq – i.e. something created by the gods] to blame the god." The solution that Tiresias then offers Oedipus is a

<sup>60</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Basiouny, Dalia 'Translator's Introduction to Bakathir's Oedipus' in Carlson, Marvin ed. *The Arab Oedipus*, 122–24.

distinctly Islamic one: “Today, you and your mother should get out of the situation you are in and (both) repent [*tatūbā*] to your merciful and compassionate Lord [*ilā rabbikumā al-tawwāb al-raḥīm*].”<sup>63</sup> The Islamic language of Tiresias reflects the Islamic nature of his solution to Oedipus’ problem.

As the play continues, Oedipus himself begins to adopt this Islamic language. When he has told Antigone in the second act that she is, in fact, both his daughter and his sister, she asks him what he wants to do and, repeating Tiresias’ Islamic solution, he says “to repent to the merciful god [*‘an atūb ilā al-ilāh al-raḥīm*].” Also Jocasta, in her last words in the play speaks in this same religiously tinged language. She says to Oedipus and Tiresias “May the god grant you both victory [*li-yaṣurkumā al-ilāh*].”<sup>64</sup>

This contrasts with the character of Loxias, who despite his frequent recourse to the charge of atheism [*ilhād*] against Tiresias, does not speak in this Islamic influenced language. Tiresias, except when he is repeating the words of others, only ever addresses the divine in the singular as “the god” [*al-ilāh*], sometimes adding the Islamic epithets already discussed. Loxias, by contrast, speaks in a polytheistic language, sometimes saying “the god” but other times saying “the gods” [*al-āliha*] or sometimes using the Greek name, Apollo.<sup>65</sup>

The final act of the play dramatizes the people’s struggle in the open. They are presented with the two rival sides, the temple on one side and the religion of Tiresias on the other. It is touch and go for our heroes at first when Loxias manages to turn the people against Oedipus, as murderer of Laius, and encourages them to chant “Down with the filthy Oedipus! Down with the house of Laius! That polluted house will not rule us after this day!”<sup>66</sup> However, after some persuasion, the people are persuaded to revolt against the temple that has been manipulating their belief in the gods and to support Tiresias and Oedipus.

The “right” side wins out in the play, at least as far as Bakathir is concerned, but I hesitate from calling it entirely the “Islamic” side – proto-Islamic would be better. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, although much of Tiresias’ language is clearly very inspired by Quranic phrases and style he stops short of using several key Islamic words, the most notable being *Allah*. God is always rendered as *al-ilāh* (the god), a less obviously Islamic word.

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<sup>63</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 37 and 43.

<sup>64</sup> Bākathīr, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 86 and 108.

<sup>65</sup> Bakathir, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, passim.

<sup>66</sup> Bakathir, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*, 127.

The second reason for this comes from the play's second epigraph: "I am the past, Tiresias, and I am clearing the way for the future. I am despair, Tiresias, and I am going so that hope may come." Here we should not necessarily see the birth of Islam but, rather, the road opened for Islamic religion to come. Perhaps Bakathir is worried about the religious implication of making the play unquestionably about Islam. This could raise some inconvenient questions: Is Tiresias to be read as a prophet, for instance? Rather than face this head on he has given a clearly Islamically inspired picture of Tiresias but not one that can be called, with any certainty, "Islam".<sup>67</sup>

The central religious message of the play, however, is clear. Religious institutions with control over the people can manipulate them for monetary gain or for political reasons. This does not mean, for Bakathir, that we should discard religion completely. However, we must always pay attention to our beliefs and be sure that we are following a correct religion. Beyond that, we must make sure (and perhaps rulers have a special obligation here) that the state (if we can call it that in this context) is guided by people who truly care about God and not about their own interests.

### The Allegory of Bakathir's *Tragedy of Oedipus*

The word "state" used in the conclusion of the previous section risks looking anachronistic in the context of the Oedipus myth. However, the play was written as much with its contemporary political context in mind as the society of ancient Greece. The *Tragedy of Oedipus* is a play that can help us explore the much-maligned technique of allegorical reading.

Broadly speaking, allegory has been seen as a simplistic way to look at a text, trawling through the characters and events trying to find one-to-one correspondences that could fit the time of writing. Allegorical readings appear not treat a text as a piece of literary production but as a cypher sent from the author to the audience that can be plugged into an algorithm to produce a 'reading'. This is the kind of allegorical reading that Sami Munir 'Amir proposed for Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Oedipus the King*.<sup>68</sup>

Romantic poets of the nineteenth century also reacted against allegory. Most prominent among these was Coleridge, who proposed a distinction between (negative) allegory, which was "but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is in

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<sup>67</sup> This could perhaps be linked (though not explicitly) to his theory that early Arabic paganism was not like other paganism but just a distorted version of the monotheism of Abraham and Ishmael. See. Bākathīr, *The Art of the Play*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Pg 141–42.

itself nothing”, and (positive) symbol, which successfully represented “the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal”.<sup>69</sup>

In the context of Arabic literature, there has also been a reaction against Frederic Jameson’s Marxist analysis of “third-world literature”. His statement that “third-world texts ... necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory” and, in particular, the word “necessarily”, was particularly problematic. It has been seen as an excessively reductive, even “racist”, way of reading “third-world” literature to constrain it in the cage of national allegory.<sup>70</sup>

Many of these reservations about allegorical reading are powerful, but the case of Bakathir’s *The Tragedy of Oedipus* does show us a way to engage with allegory in a more productive way to get new insights from a text and its context. Even if we do not follow Jameson’s model, we can share his desire to think more closely about allegory, especially in the context of Arabic literature where allegorical readings are so common.

The twentieth century has seen a number of attempts to reconceptualise allegory as a literary form. Walter Benjamin is a central figure in this reconsideration and his work can help show how allegory should not be seen simply as a code to crack but as a “form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is.” Allegory and allegorical modes of writing in Benjamin are tied closely to change and decay in the world. Far from being a one-to-one relationship with the world, allegories can construct different and changing meanings from an unstable world. “Allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” is his famous aphorism. Times of rupture and crisis for Benjamin, were particularly ripe for this kind of allegorical writing. In his work, it was the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe that provided the material but it can also be applied, in similar ways, to mid-twentieth century Egypt.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual* (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816), 36–37.

<sup>70</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65–88. Against see Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the “National Allegory”’, *Social Text*, no. 17 (1987): 3–25. Some have more antagonistically called some of Jameson’s arguments “vintage racism”: Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 254. For a defence of the article see: Imre Szeman, ‘Who’s Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (2001): 803–27.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 162 & 178. It is a complex text and I have benefited from Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

It is almost impossible entirely to avoid an allegorical reading of the *Tragedy of Oedipus*. Bakathir himself said in his 1958 series of lectures published under the title *The Art of The Play* [*Fann al-Masrahiyya*], that *al-ramziyya* (from the word *ramz* or symbol) was a technique that he used. Bakathir separated *al-ramziyya* into two types. The first he translated as “allegory”. He explained this type as the phenomenon when specific characters in a play or a novel represent another specific thing. He gave the classic example of this as the nation “Egypt” being represented in a piece of literature as a beautiful woman. The second type is broader. It is when the play as a whole has a second meaning above the action of the play itself and he compares this to the echo of a voice. The play can exist on its own without this higher meaning (just as the voice can exist without the echo) but it also has other meanings that can be heard above this. This seems to be a more sophisticated type of allegory than simply replacing one character for a concept. It can also come closer to Benjamin’s idea as allegory as a form of expression and his comparison between ruin and allegory, as we shall see later.<sup>72</sup>

The *Tragedy of Oedipus* was the play that Bakathir used to explain his own use of allegory. In the lecture, he explained the details of an allegorical reading of this play (though maintaining that the play could also be read on its own without these interpretations). “I wrote it in the harsh conditions that came after the great [Arab] national catastrophe [*nakba*], the Palestinian catastrophe.” He said it could be read to reflect “the time between the Palestinian war and the Egyptian revolution [of 1952].” Parts of the play are tied specifically to the loss of the Arab armies in 1948. The scheming of the high priest at the bidding of Polybus is connected to the diplomatic deals done behind the Arabs’ backs, most notably the Balfour Declaration.<sup>73</sup>

However, much more of the play is tied into the anti-colonial, socialist revolution in Egypt. The plague in Thebes, “which was caused by the temple seizing agricultural lands so the people only had a little,” is compared to the feudalism [*iqṭāʾ*] of mid-twentieth century Egypt, which led to the riots of early 1952. He also made reference to Nasser’s revolution on a number of occasions. “The confiscation of the temple’s property and its distribution to the people of Thebes. Does that not remind you of the confiscation and distribution that the Egyptian Revolution undertook?” Tiresias too, in his defence of Oedipus in front of the people,

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<sup>72</sup> Bākathīr, *The Art of the Play*, 105–10, esp. 105–06. His English translation translates the term *ramziyya* in the title as “symbolism”. In the text the first type of *ramziyya* has the English word “allegory” alongside it. It is not clear if he is trying to separate allegory and symbol as Coleridge had (and Benjamin also did) but, if he is, he does not appear to be following the definitions of Coleridge (or Benjamin) closely.

<sup>73</sup> Bākathīr, *The Art of the Play*, 106–08. Quote from 106.

is compared to “a well-known state [*dawla ma ‘rūfa* – surely Egypt] which made the same stand for the Arabs, and defended them in international events [*al-mahāfil al-dawliyya*] and was the cause of the banishment of their enemies.” While those who seek refuge in the oracle of Delphi are like those who “run to colonial treaties” [*al-aḥlāf al-isti ‘māriyya*].<sup>74</sup> But Bakathir did not want the play to be tied down to a single interpretation and said that Loxias, for instance, could be seen as many different things at different times: Feudalism, Colonialism, or deceitful religion, for instance, leaving it open to various possible readings.<sup>75</sup>

Many critics have followed Bakathir’s own invitations of how to read the play. Carlson writes that he was “directly inspired by current political events, namely the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948.”<sup>76</sup> However, even with the playwright’s caveats, it can be difficult at times to see how these connections he makes in his allegories actually work. As Ahmed Etman charitably puts it, “the major problem in Bakatheer’s play is that this political content cannot be easily concluded from the dramatic action itself.”<sup>77</sup>

Looking at the details of the play, the picture is confusing. If Polybus is supposed to represent the colonial and Zionist powers in the 1948 war who sought to corrupt the Arab leaders (Loxias in the play), then it is not clear from the action. Polybus’ role is very minor and he comes in as a kind of hero at the end, bringing food for the people and uniting the two kingdoms. Of course, it is possible that Bakathir was giving us a positive message of a harmonious future between Israel and the rest of the Arab world but that does not quite seem to fit the pessimistic tone of his own commentary.

What is even more noticeable is that many of the political events that Bakathir attempts to tie to the play happened several years after it was published. The Egyptian revolution with its professed rejection of both colonial and feudal systems did not happen until 1952 and did not fully take its “anticolonial” shape until a few years after that. One could argue that Bakathir was catching a mood in 1949 that eventually led to the revolution of 1952. However, in his interpretation, some details of the text would need to be distorted to make it fit his revolutionary mould. For instance, he says – writing in 1958 – that the temple had been

<sup>74</sup> Bākathīr, *The Art of the Play*, 108–09.

<sup>75</sup> Bākathīr, *The Art of the Play*, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Carlson, *The Arab Oedipus*, 7. See also Hādī Raḍwān, ‘Tawjīh al-Ustūra fī A ‘māl Bākathir al-Masraḥiyya [The Direction of Myth in Bakathir’s Theatrical Works]’, in *Theatre of Ali Ahmed Bakathir*, ed. Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 2010), 371–91.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmed Etman, ‘The Greek Concept of Tragedy in the Arab Culture. How to Deal with an Islamic *Oedipus*?’ in Decreus and Kolk, *Rereading classics in ‘East’ and ‘West’*, 281–99. Quote from 296.

taking “agricultural land [*al-arḍ al-zirāʿiyya*]” and depriving the people of it. This designation of the temple’s possessions as agricultural does not appear in the original play (where the temple’s wealth is more broadly referred to as *amwāl wa-amlāk* [money and possessions]). This reference to agricultural land seems like an effort to read later events (such as the appropriation of land) back on to the play. Likewise the events in Suez of 1956 seem to be referenced in Bakathir’s praise of Nasser. Much of his interpretation reflects the politics of 1958 more than 1949.

If we go back to the period in which the play was written, there is a different set of political events that map just as well on to the action. As we saw in the previous chapter, 1949 was a hugely eventful time for Egypt, politically. The atmosphere of uncertainty and political violence made this an important and difficult year.

To see how this could have been reflected in the play, let us start just before 1949, on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1948. At 11 p.m., the government issued an order that the powerful religio-political Society of the Muslim Brothers, headed by Hassan al-Banna, should be dissolved. Their religiously inspired message for how the country should be governed and their, broadly, anti-imperial stance meant they were becoming a dangerous, but increasingly powerful force, especially in the wake of the war in Palestine in 1948. The government, no doubt worried by their growth, accused them (not without some evidence) of being intent on “widespread terroristic activity of pressing danger to the security and existence of the state.” They had been implicated in making and hoarding explosives, deaths resulting from battles with their opponents and two actual bombings. The prime-minister Nuqrashi was one of the prime movers in this conviction. “The fearlessness with which Nuqrashi pursued his course following the decree was equalled only by the tenseness which seized Egypt.”

On the 28<sup>th</sup> December, Nuqrashi was assassinated by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The religious establishment of ‘ulama’ at al-Azhar pronounced the murder ‘Anti-Islamic’. Hassan al-Banna tried to curb the escalation of hostilities as much as possible but on 12<sup>th</sup> February he was assassinated himself. The winter of 1948-9 was probably the worst in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood up to that point. It was in this climate that Ali Ahmed Bakathir was writing his *Tragedy of Oedipus*.<sup>78</sup>

The level of Bakathir’s association with the Muslim Brotherhood is hard to ascertain for certain but is an important question to answer as political background to the play. In a PhD

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<sup>78</sup> The details of these two paragraphs follow Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 58–71. The quotes are from the same section.



thesis on the playwright from 1972, Bankole Omotoso addressed the “accusation that he was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.” Many who allege that he was a member often rely on the evidence such as the plays he published in the Muslim Brotherhood’s official journal. “Although Bā-kathīr’s family has denied the accusation, saying that he would publish his works in any newspaper or magazine that would take them, it is still widely believed in Egypt that Bā-kathīr was a member of the Brotherhood.”<sup>79</sup>

There is, in fact, more to link Bakathir to the Muslim Brotherhood than his articles published in their journal. According to one story, after the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954, Bakathir’s name was on a list of people to be considered for arrest. The reason given was partly his writings for the Muslim Brotherhood journal and partly his “friendly relations [‘*alāqāt wuddiyya*’]” with some of the Muslim Brotherhood. The story goes that it was Nasser himself who refused the arrest, saying “we were all friends with the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of their cause.” In fact, it is also said that Bakathir first was introduced to Nasser in the Muslim Brotherhood’s house in 1945 [*dār al-ikhwān al-muslimīn*] and met him there several times.<sup>80</sup>

The publication of *The Tragedy of Oedipus* also provides a number of clues about his involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the mid-1940s Bakathir began writing with a small group called *lajnat al-nashr li-l-jāmi‘iyyīn* [The Committee for Publication of University Graduates]. This was a group headed by two brothers ‘Abd al-Hamid and Sa‘id al-Sahhar, who sought to nurture a group of talented young writers. The three most prominent of these were Naguib Mahfouz, Sayyid Qutb and Ali Ahmed Bakathir. From 1946, the al-Sahhar brothers joined up with a man called Muhammad Hilmi al-Minyawi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, to start their own press, *Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī*. It is this press that published Bakathir’s *Oedipus* even after one of the proprietors, al-Minyawi, had been arrested on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1948 for his involvement in the Muslim Brotherhood. It is through this network, a recent PhD by Giedre Sabaseviciute has argued, that Sayyid Qutb got to know and joined the Muslim Brotherhood. After around 1951, when the al-Sahhar brothers had split from al-Minyawi, *Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī*, according to Sabaseviciute, “went back to the Brotherhood,

<sup>79</sup> Bankole Ajibasi Omotoso, ‘‘Ali Aḥmad Bā-Kathīr, A Contemporary Conservative Arab Writer: An Appraisal of His Main Plays and Novels’ (PhD. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1972), 33–34.

<sup>80</sup> Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd, ‘‘Ali Aḥmad Bākathīr Marāhil Majhūla Min Ḥayātihi [Unknown Stages in Ali Ahmed Bakathir’s Life]’, in *Theatre of Ali Ahmed Bakathir*, ed. Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamīd (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 2010), 21–58.

to publish their [party] literature.” As well as the party’s documents it also continued to publish Islamically oriented works by both Qutb and Bakathir.<sup>81</sup>

None of proves that Bakathir was a full member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, it shows that his social and literary circle was closely affiliated to the Brotherhood or, at the very least, sympathetic to their ideas. It is possible that Bakathir’s relationship to the Brotherhood was more like that of the Palestinian journalist and publisher Muhammad ‘Ali al-Tahir. Al-Tahir was a good friend and Bakathir helped him a number of times when he was on the run from the law. A cat-lover, Bakathir was even charged with looking after al-Tahir’s cat, *Habīsa* [the prisoner], if the Palestinian was arrested.<sup>82</sup> Al-Tahir was not a member of the Brotherhood but, due to his strong stance on Palestine and defence of Arab-Islamic people against colonialism, he had a great respect for the organisation and Hassan al-Banna, in particular.<sup>83</sup> Bakathir, likewise, had deep ties to the group and continued to write for their magazine, *al-Da‘wa*, right up to 1954. After the execution of Sayyid Qutb in 1966 Bakathir’s name was submitted to the authorities again for investigation due to his links with the controversial figure. He was, apparently, let off on the grounds that he had never been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, or any political organisation.<sup>84</sup>

If we do read Bakathir’s play through lens of the events of 1948-9, centring around religious issues and the place that correct religion should take in the people’s lives, then interpreting the play in a political way becomes a very different, and somewhat easier, affair. In this equation, Tiresias, the priest banished from the temple for preaching the correct religion, represents the dissolved Muslim Brotherhood and al-Banna. The temple, which exploits the people in the name of religion, then can be seen to represent the British backed establishment and even the institution of al-Azhar, who were willing to denounce the Muslim Brotherhood.

This reading brings us much closer to the Islamic character which this chapter has argued is at the heart of *The Tragedy of Oedipus*. Marvin Carlson spent four paragraphs discussing this play in an article that surveyed the major plays of Bakathir’s career. In it he summarised his Islamic reading of the play saying that Oedipus begins a proto-Marxist, atheist who wants to redistribute the wealth of the temple to the people and ends up as an Islamic

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<sup>81</sup> Giedre Sabaseviciute, ‘Une Trajectoire d’Engagement Intellectuel En Contexte Révolutionnaire. Le Cas de Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966)’ (PhD. Dissertation, EHESS, Paris, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ṭāhir, *Ḥalām al-Sijn* [*The Darkness of Prison*] (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1951), 482.

<sup>83</sup> Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ṭāhir, *Mu‘taqal Hākstib* [*Prisoner of Huckstep*] (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ al-‘ālimiyya, 1950), 42–44 & 60–66.

<sup>84</sup> Hamid, *Unknown Stages in Ali Ahmed Bakathir’s Life*, 42 & 25–26.

believer. He also ties the play to the writings of Bakathir's contemporary, Sayyid Qutb, saying that *Social Justice in Islam* by Qutb "is so similar in its outlook that it might be used as an interpretative gloss on the play."<sup>85</sup> This chapter agrees with Carlson's basic message that the play is best interpreted from this Islamic perspective and so (in terms of its contemporary politics) in relation to the events involving the Muslim Brotherhood in the winter of 1948-9. However, there are more complexities and details to be added to the political and religious picture.

In 1954, there was another crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, this time much more forceful. On the 26<sup>th</sup> October, Nasser alleged, the Muslim Brotherhood had made an attempt on his life. The reprisals were harsh. "Seven members of the Guidance Council... received life imprisonment with hard labour... Seven members of the Society were sentenced to death by hanging [including the Supreme guide whose sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment with hard labour]."<sup>86</sup> After this it became very difficult to show support for the Muslim Brotherhood in public. Propagandist pamphlets were published against the organisation, including one called "These... are the Brotherhood!", to which Taha Hussein contributed an article.<sup>87</sup> Omotoso says that "It was no longer safe for anyone to be remotely associated with the Brotherhood."<sup>88</sup>

In one final twist, let us turn back to Bakathir's 1958 interpretation of his play. He gives his audience a specific reading of the temple of Delphi:

This religious movement which was, in its inception, a lighthouse of direction and guidance [*irshād*] and then turned into an instrument for personal ambition and became a clear danger, threatening the country with destruction, do you not find a resemblance to the temple of Delphi, which turned from a centre of guidance and light to a marketplace of business and ambition.<sup>89</sup>

The "religious movement" that he refers to is clearly the Muslim Brotherhood and he repeats the common charges against it as trying to destroy the country and trading in religion [*al-tijāra bi-l-dīn*], which was a very common insult directed against the Muslim Brotherhood at the time and ever since.

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<sup>85</sup> Carlson Marvin 'The Religious Drama of Egypt's Ali Ahmed Bakathir' in Lance Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 117–26 esp. 120–21.

<sup>86</sup> Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 151–62. Quote from 160.

<sup>87</sup> *Hā'ulā'... hum al-Ikhwān!* [No publisher or date. 1954?]. Taha Hussein's article appears 5–15.

<sup>88</sup> Omotoso, 'Alī Aḥmad Bā-Kathīr, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Bākathīr, *The Art of the Play*, 108–09.

In ten years between Bakathir's writing of the play and his lecture explaining its allegories the message of the play in regard to the Muslim Brotherhood has been entirely inverted. This chapter, though, does not seek to just switch one allegorical reading for another. My point is that allegorical readings can be interesting *in themselves* rather than for what they tell us about the play. What is important about Bakathir's 1958 interpretation of his own play is that it shows how, in the intellectual climate under Nasser, a writer can completely change the message of a play written in 1949.<sup>90</sup>

Should we discard Bakathir's 1958 interpretation of his own play for one that more closely resembles the events on the late 1940s? After all, the author does not have exclusive right to interpret his text. I argue that we should not. It does not do justice to the interpretive possibilities of allegory just to discard one reading and replace it with another. If we follow Benjamin's view that allegory is a kind of writing that is well suited to expressing change, impermanence and uncertainty, we can come to more complex conclusions.

We can read allegory, as Benjamin would have it, as "conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment."<sup>91</sup> In many ways the image of a ruin carries many of the same resonances as Bakathir's "echo". No allegory is final or complete. No reading is definitive. Since Arabic literature and literary criticism are so invested in allegory, instead of ignoring this, we should exploit its creative possibilities. For Benjamin, the rupture and strife of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century in Germany was crucial background to the allegories of Baroque drama. Likewise, in Egypt in the mid-twentieth century, the political background was key. The uncertainty and the changing loyalties of the late 1940s and 1950s meant the time was ripe for this allegorical mode of expression. It was not simply a case of using allegory to hide your message from censors. Allegory reveals something about the political atmosphere at the time, its dangers and forced contradictions.

To illustrate the point, we could turn to an example from a writer with very different politics. In his 1964 novel Waguih Ghali described the political situation in the late 1950s, around the time that Bakathir was giving his lectures on his work. The main character Ram, in conversation with his friend and lover Edna, talks about joining the communist party:

If someone has read an enormous amount of literature, and has a thorough knowledge of contemporary history, from the beginning of this century to the

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<sup>90</sup> I am not, necessarily, saying that this is a cynical attempt on Bakathir's part to betray his previous allegiances. Bakathir seems to have genuinely admired Nasser in many ways and perhaps he saw the same positives in him (Arabic nationalism and support of the Palestinian cause) that drew him into Muslim Brotherhood circles.

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 235.

present day, and he has an imagination, and he is intelligent, and he is just, and he is kind, and he cares about other people of all races, and he has enough time to think, and he is honest and sincere, there are two things that can happen to him; he can join the Communist Party and then leave it wallowing in its shortcomings, or he can become mad. Or... if he is unconsciously insincere, he may join one of the left-wing societies in Europe, and enjoy himself.

He continues:

“I am insincere... but honest”

Ram had joined the Communist Party but has left. Edna asks him why he did not tell his friend Font that he had joined the Party. He replies:

“Font would have joined it too if he had known. But Font is sincere. He’d have gone on being an active communist here and he would have been imprisoned and tortured.”<sup>92</sup>

This passage describes the kind of political ground that was ripe for allegorical writing. Expressions of transparent meaning and inability to change were unappealing and perhaps dangerous. Ghali’s reaction was cynicism and sarcasm and Bakathir’s was allegory. Both responses shared one feature. They were “insincere ... but honest.”

### Allegory and Translation

Salman Rushdie, when asked whether his writing was allegorical, was resistant; “Allegory stands for something,” he says, “and the real story is not told. Allegory asks readers to make a translation, to uncover a secret text which has not actually been written.”<sup>93</sup> Although Rushdie meant this remark as an attack on simplistic allegorical readings, the idea that allegory is a kind of translation can be explored further. This thesis has argued for a model of translation that put the emphasis on changes and developments in the target language rather than on accuracy in relation to the source text. Likewise, in the case of allegory, I do not want to try to uncover an allegory buried within the text but, instead, to look at the creative possibilities of the allegorical mode of expression.

“The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention towards the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original,” said Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Task of the Translator”, employing the same imagery of echo that Bakathir did of allegory. “Translation finds itself not in the centre of the language forest but on the outside

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<sup>92</sup> Waguhi Ghali, *Beer in the Snooker Club* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2010), 189. First published 1964.

<sup>93</sup> Interview in *Scraps* 3.2–3 (August 1985), 108.

facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language the reverberation of the work in the alien one.”<sup>94</sup>

While we should not go as far as to say that Bakathir’s view of allegory is the same as Benjamin’s view of allegory and his view of translation, there are still similarities that are important and useful – particularly as Benjamin’s work on both allegory and translation seem to pivot around Bakathir’s play so well. Like translation, allegory need not have a fixed relationship to the text. It is a way of writing and interpreting that, if we follow Benjamin, is intrinsically tied to change and impermanence. Therefore, different allegorical interpretations do not invalidate others but they are all part of the allegorical way of expression, which is open to different readings.

This model of allegory allows us to look at Arabic literature of the time in a different way. It does not see allegory as a simple one-to-one correspondence, nor as just a way to confuse the censor. Instead, it was an aesthetic response to the fragility of conviction and lack of any sense of permanence that characterised much of mid-twentieth century Egyptian politics. Bakathir’s version of Oedipus shows exactly how that could work in one play. It also shows the effects that the move into Nasser’s new Egypt could have on a version of Oedipus. The place of Oedipus in the new Egypt is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>94</sup>Walter Benjamin ‘The Task of the Translator’, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writing*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 253–63. Quote from 258–59.

## Chapter Six: Ali Salem's *Comedy of Oedipus*

Nasser's propaganda in the 1950s and 1960s boasted that Egypt could 'publish a new book every six hours, stage a new play every week and build a new hotel every 15 days...'<sup>1</sup> This period, referred to as the Golden Age of Egyptian theatre, has always been seen an extremely rich and productive time for drama in the country.<sup>2</sup> Many of the plays were explicitly political and, in a time when political parties were banned, the theatre became a kind of "ersatz parliament".<sup>3</sup> It was, however, a parliament that the government intended to co-opt and control. Things that promoted the Nasserist line were promoted and those that went against it were often censored.<sup>4</sup>

As a new theatre emerged, one particularly concerned with the left wing, socialist and post-colonial moment, influences came from several places, including pioneering European writers like Brecht, Ionesco, Pirandello. Yet, the same question that has recurred through previous chapters was still of prime concern to many: how can we make Egyptian theatre? Or, more specifically, how can we make our theatre Egyptian? As Nasser's political rhetoric was promoting the new era in which Egyptians were finally ruling their own country and colonial European powers could not impose their will on this independent nation, new theatrical debates emerged.

Again, ancient Greek theatre and history was an important and often overlooked part of this debate. It was used by different practitioners as a way to work through issues of Egyptian-ness and theatrical form. Greek drama (and Oedipus specifically) can offer a different and productive way into the debates of this Golden Age.

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<sup>1</sup> Aḥmad Ḥamrūsh, *Mujtama' Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir [The Society of Gamal Abdel Nasser]* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1984), 252. Though Ḥamrūsh, no fan of Nasser, says that the quality was low.

<sup>2</sup> For references to the late 1950s and 1960s as the Golden Age of Egyptian theatre see e.g. Abdel-Aziz Hammouda, 'Modern Egyptian Theatre: Three Major Dramatists', *World Literature Today* 53, no. 4 (1979): 601. ; Rasheed el-Enany, 'The Quest for Justice in the Theatre of Alfred Farag: Different Moulds, One Theme', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 31, no. 2 (2000): 171 among others.

<sup>3</sup> Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, 140.

<sup>4</sup> Jalāl al-Sharqāwī, *Ḥayātī fī-l-Masrah [My Life in the Theatre]* pt. 1 vol. 1 (Cairo: GEBO, 1996), 618 n.1: al-Sharqawi notes that Tharwat 'Ukāsha, minister of culture 1958-62 and 1966-70 was known as the "minister of censorship" [*wazīr al-man*].

Yusuf Idris' 1964 manifesto, collected in a series of articles in *al-Kātib* magazine, under the title 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre' [*Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī*] is a treatise that seeks to reject a Greek model for Egyptian theatre and, in fact, is invested in showing why Greek and Egyptian theatre should not interact. The 1970 production of Ali Salem' *Comedy of Oedipus* or *You Are the One Who Killed the Beast* [*Kūmīdyā Ūdīb* or *Anta illī 'atalt al-Waḥsh*], on the other hand, takes the opposite stance. Ali Salem uses contemporary discussions about the ancient Egyptian origins of theatre and the Oedipus myth to claim ancient Greek theatre for the ancient Egyptians and paint it as authentic Egyptian cultural property.<sup>5</sup>

As well as being an important text for looking at how Egyptian theatre practitioners used ancient Greek theatre and history to think about their contemporary theatre, Ali Salem's play is also an interesting new take on the Oedipus story. He strips from it the incest and the issue of fate and turns it into a play about the nature of power and the relationship between the ruler and the people. It has been criticised by many, therefore, for only bearing passing resemblance to Sophocles' Oedipus. In fact, it takes more cues from Sophocles than is often admitted. It also develops ideas that have been explored in earlier Egyptian versions of Oedipus and takes them to their logical conclusion. It should be seen both as a response to the original play and to the history of Egyptian adaptations that we have been looking at.

### Oedipus under Nasser

Before examining the debates around Yusuf Idris' 1964 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre' directly, let us briefly trace the cultural spread of Greek theatre in general, including Oedipus in 1950s and 1960s Egypt. Oedipus and other works of Greek literature begin to be seen as a much more recognisable cultural touch-stones in this period.

From 11<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1958, the journalist Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, published a 7 part series of articles in *al-Ahrām* newspaper discussing the "psychological complexes which rule the Middle East". In the sixth, he included a striking discussion of the British Oedipal Complex:

#### Oedipus the King .... In Britain

Oedipus was a king just as Britain was great.

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<sup>5</sup> Idrīs' article first appeared in *al-Kātib* Magazine in three consecutive issues January, February, March 1964. It has been reprinted in several places. I reference it from an anthology of articles about theatre al-Khaṭīb, *Naẓariyyat al-Masraḥ* vol. 2, 595–654. Henceforth referred to as Idrīs, 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre'. Ali Salem's text first appeared in 1970 with his introduction published by Dār al-Hilāl. I will be using the 'Alī Sālīm *Kūmīdyā Ūdīb: aw anta illī 'atalt al-Waḥsh* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūli, 1986). The introduction in the 1970 edition also includes an introduction from 'Alī al-Rā'ī.



Then he became a legend in the *Iliad* of the Greek poet Homer, just as Britain did in the poems of Rudyard Kipling, poet of the Empire on which the sun never set.

Oedipus ended by becoming a difficult complex in modern psychiatry, just as Britain has ended up becoming a difficult complex in the modern Middle East.

How did it happen?

How did Oedipus turn from being a king, into a legend, and then into a complex?

How did Britain turn from being a kingdom, into a legend, and then into a complex?

Tragedy!

The rest of the article then goes on to argue that the tragedy that had turned Britain into Oedipus was the Suez crisis of 1956. This was one of Nasser's first great victories. After he had nationalised the Suez Canal the British, in co-operation with France and Israel launched a land and air attack against Egypt. For various reasons, important among which was American disapproval, the offensive failed and Egypt was victorious.

Haykal compares these events to the plot of Oedipus. Just as Oedipus killed the person he should not have (his father) and got close to the person he should not have (his mother), so Britain, in the Suez crisis, tried to kill the one they should not have (Arab Nationalism) and got close to the nation they should not have (Israel). Even in this example, Haykal says, at least Oedipus had the excuse that he did not know what he was doing; Britain had no such excuse.<sup>6</sup>

In part the ease with which Haykal uses Oedipus as a reference shows that he could expect his audience to be familiar with, at least, the basics of the myth. It also shows how differing political readings of the Oedipus story were beginning to open up in the period. In the works of Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ali Ahmed Bakathir, for instance, the issue of the oracle and fate did not fit easily with the political questions that the plays were trying to ask about the problems of ruling a country, the relationship between the people and their ruler and the problems of one-man rule. Haykal's article presented a new kind of political interpretation. He tied Oedipus' oracle (sleeping with his mother and marrying his father) directly into the "political" narrative. The British have placed upon themselves a pollution similar to the one Oedipus created for himself. It is their transgression that has brought their post-Suez fate upon them. Clearly, the parallel does not work on all levels; the British cannot quite be said to have

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<sup>6</sup> *al-Ahrām*, 20 January, 1958. Haykal goes on to say that fate was not on the side of the British Oedipus but, rather, it was with the Egyptians. There is a passing reference to Oedipus in *Iliad* 23:679–680.

been unaware of what they were doing in the same way as Oedipus. What is important, though, is that Haykal no longer needed to separate the oracle and fate from his political point.

The new Nasserist period allowed this move. In the public political discourse, fate and politics had begun to come together. Nasser constructed himself a fatalistic narrative for his own position and Egypt's new place in the world. In his *Philosophy of a Revolution* he argued that destiny was on his side and Egypt's side. "Fate does not play jokes" [*inn al-qadar la yahzal*] he says shortly before launching into these paragraphs:

I don't know why, whenever I reach this stage in my thoughts when I am sitting alone in my room contemplating, I always remember the famous story of Italian poet Luigi Pirandello, which he called *Six Characters in Search of Actors*.

Indeed, history is full of heroes who have made for themselves roles of great heroism and who have played them in at critical moments on the stage.

History is also full of roles of great heroism which have never found the heroes to play them on stage. I do not know why I always imagine that, in this region where we live, there is an important role searching for a hero to play it. I do not know why I imagine that this role, tired out by its wandering across this wide region all around us, would settle tired and exhausted at the borders of our country and beckon us to move. It calls us to step up to the part and put on the costume, as no-one but us will do it.<sup>7</sup>

From early in his rule, Nasser was depicting Egypt as a country with a destiny on the world stage and himself as the destined ruler of Egypt. This fusing of fate and politics is a change that began to happen in this period and is an important background to adaptations of the play in the 1960s.

Oedipus was appearing more often off the stage. The poet and playwright Naguib Surur [1932-1978], although he never wrote his own version of the play, referenced the ancient Greek hero often in his poetry. Surur's engagement with the tragic hero is very different from the dramatic adaptations. Oedipus, for Surur, represented an impossible struggle for the truth as much as a man ruled by his destiny. His poem 48 in the collection *Luzūm mā yalzam*<sup>8</sup> concerns the story of Oedipus. It starts lamenting his fate:

<sup>7</sup> Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir, *Falsafat al-Thawra [Philosophy of the Revolution]* (Cairo(?): Bayt al-'Arab li-l-Tawthīq al-'Aṣrī, 1996), 51–53. First published 1953.

<sup>8</sup> In my version (Shuruq 2006) this is poem 48 but in other versions it is poem 50. The name of this collection (literally: the necessity of what is necessary) is a joke on the classical Arabic rhyming concept of *Luzūm mā lā yalzam* (literally: the necessity of what is not necessary), particularly associated with al-Ma'arrī's poetry, which involved extending the rhyme at the end of the line back

No... no escape from error [*Khaṭī'a*]  
 Oedipus, your oracle pursues you  
 That wretched destiny that you flee from and to  
 You have killed your father, so knock on the gates of Thebes  
 Go to your mother's embrace."

He continues by lamenting the difficulty of finding the answer to the world's questions. In the end it is the blinded Oedipus in exile who becomes Surur's focus:

How wretched is the man who is blind when he sees  
 How wretched, too, the man who sees when he is blind  
 Darkness, welcome... O Darkness  
 My path without direction  
 The widest of all of humanity's paths  
 ...  
 Farewell Thebes  
 Land of plague, debauchery and fear  
 Playground of idols and priests!  
 What is counterfeit, Oedipus, and what is real?  
 What is victory and what is defeat?  
 What is cowardice and what is heroism?  
 What is adultery and what is virtue?  
 ...  
 The path of the night is the best of paths  
 O Darkness... you are my only light.<sup>9</sup>

In this poem, Surur's focus is not the fate and the course of Sophocles' play but Oedipus' wanderings, blindness and despair. His Oedipus, unlike the Oedipuses of the theatre is personal, internal and *anti*-political. He is not an Oedipus who stays in the city or who is

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more syllables than is strictly necessary as a show of technical ability. Surur is, therefore, poking fun at his own poetic ability and saying that there will be no unnecessary displays of virtuosity in his own work.

<sup>9</sup> Najīb Surūr, *Luzūm mā yalzam [The Necessity of what is Necessary]* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2006), 129–31. First published 1976 but first written in Budapest 1963–64.

concerned at all with its governance. He leaves behind this “land of plague, debauchery and fear / Playground of idols and priests” and does not concern himself with it.

In fact, rather than the political Oedipus of the stage versions of *Oedipus Tyrannos* this is the wandering Oedipus of the “sequel” *Oedipus at Colonus*. As someone who knew classical literature well Surur would have been aware of this later text, which Taha Hussein also published along with his translation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in 1932. Some of Surur’s other poems such as “The New Oedipus” from his collection *The Human Tragedy* [*al-Trāḡīdiyā al-Insāniyya*] also focused on this wandering, self-reflexive Oedipus.<sup>10</sup> It is an Oedipus of *poetry* more generally. He is alone, introspective and conflicted, unlike the ‘political’ Oedipus of the Egyptian theatre.

In 1967 a new translation of Oedipus into Arabic by Ali Hafez appeared. Hafez, head of the department of history and antiquities at the University of Alexandria, added an introduction to his translation. It situates his Oedipus in an expressly political context, foregrounding it with long discussions of democracy, tyranny and one man rule. He concludes that this is a play about the dangers of one man rule as a system. It is not the ruler himself to blame, in fact he might not even realise he is becoming tyrannical but it is built into the system. “It is in the nature of the dominant ruler [*al-ḥākim al-musayṭir*] to exceed his first ambitions for power first by cunning then by force. After that he might behave [in certain ways] so much like the most just of rulers that even he begins to forget that he is a tyrant... this is the key the Sophocles wants to impart in the tragedy of Oedipus into the minds of all rulers and all who are ruled.”<sup>11</sup>

As in Haykal’s psychological interpretation, the oracle becomes part of the political message of the play. Reading the play in the light of Athenian democratic politics, he argues, that because the people are the ones who give the ruler power, “in the logic of the Athenians, the dictatorial ruler is the killer of his mother or father, as Sophocles put it.” By attacking the people the ruler attacks the ones who have created him. Hafez goes on to pick apart the details of the prophecy in more detail:

Analysts have proposed that the myth of Oedipus – his marriage to his mother without his knowledge and the fact that he becomes both father and brother to his

<sup>10</sup> Najīb Surūr, *al-Trāḡīdiyā al-Insāniyya* [*The Human Tragedy*] (Cairo: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 1967), 96–98.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Ali Ḥāfiẓ, *Min al-Masraḥ al-‘Ālamī: min al-‘Amāl al-Mukhtāra Sūfūklīs 2* [*World Theatre: Selected Works of Sophocles 2*] (Kuwait: Wizārat al-‘Ālām, 1972). First published in Cairo 1967 by Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī. Quote from 16.

children because they are from the same womb – is like the kind of government that makes the ruler the guardian of his people [*umma*] and so makes him both the father and brother to the children of his land as they are all from one mother.<sup>12</sup>

His message that *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a play about this kind of one-man rule and the nature of a ruler's relationship to the people in that system is familiar from earlier chapters. The key difference here is that he does not make this argument by getting rid of the oracle but by saying that it stands as a metaphor for this question of power, which continues to dominate Egyptian Oedipuses in the 1960s

### Greek Drama in Egypt in the 1960s

Greek drama continued to be an important part of the theatrical calendar, particularly in the 1960s. In the 1964-5 season a translation of Aristophanes' *Frogs* was performed at the Pocket Theatre for 17 nights and seen by 3080 people. In 1965-6 Taha Hussein's translation of *Antigone* was performed at the World Theatre for 12 nights and was seen by 3165 people. Also in 1968 Yahya 'Abd Allah produced a short avant-garde adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis* for the new Egyptian cultural magazine Gallery 68, in which the cast were all supposed to be dogs pretending to be humans, called *The Dogs under the Table* [*al-Kilāb Taḥt al-Mā'ida*]. It was, unsurprisingly, not performed.<sup>13</sup>

Probably the most important translation of the time was Louis Awad's *Oresteia* in Arabic. It is slightly unclear when it was first published (the first edition does not have a date) but the *Agamemnon* was first performed in December 1966 at the Pocket Theatre in Cairo.<sup>14</sup> A selection from it was also included in Tawfiq al-Hakim's "Our Theatrical Mould" [*Qālabunā al-Masraḥī*], published in 1967.<sup>15</sup>

Then in 1968 this script was used as the basis for a staging of the *Oresteia* at the Opera, directed by the famous Greek director Takis Mouzenides. A reviewer in *al-Ahrām* was particularly complimentary, saying that before he felt that Greek tragedy was "very cultural but difficult to digest". Mouzenides, however, had "merged our spirit with the Greek spirit" and "Orestes seemed like one of our sons." The similarities of this rhetoric to the introduction

<sup>12</sup> Hāfiz, *World Theatre: Sophocles*, 17, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *al-Masraḥ*, June 1966 special edition 'al-Masraḥ al-Misrī 1952-1966: Dirāsa Shāmila [Egyptian Theatre 1952-1966: Complete Study]', 274, 283. *Jālirī* 68, May 1968, 68-79.

<sup>14</sup> *al-Masraḥ*, December 1966, 12-14. The play may not have been first performed until after Ramadan (so January 1967).

<sup>15</sup> Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, *Qālabunā al-Masraḥī [Our Theatrical Mould]* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1967).

to al-Hakim's *Oedipus the King* shows how influential the ideas that were being discussed in the 1940s still were in the 1960s<sup>16</sup>

Issues of performance were still hotly debated. One particularly instructive case to foreground the debates of the next section was the performance of Aristophanes' *Clouds* at the World Theatre [*al-Masrah al-‘Ālamī*] in 1967. *Al-Masrah* magazine carried two reviews next to each other, both of which savaged the performance. Their criticisms were wide ranging, from the poor translation of ‘Ali Nur to the ahistorical attempt to make Socrates a proponent of socialism. They also particularly attacked its performance style and raised questions about what the correct standards demanded by Greek drama were. Both reviews singled out its parochial approach and worried about the contamination of folk traditions in the high art of Aristophanes.

The first reviewer, Galal al-‘Ashari, likened the chorus to a school choir or singers at a *moulid* (a traditional religious festival). The solo songs, he said, sounded like a singer at “a night club or a wedding”. Once again it is the singing that is particularly attacked – and it is attacked because it makes what should be a refined performance into an un-refined, “popular” [*sha‘bī*] performance.

Ahmed Etman, reviewing the play early in his career, also criticised the singing on several grounds. In part, he questioned its accuracy to the original text. So, he criticised the director for bringing the chorus on at the beginning (rather than after the first scene as was done in Aristophanic comedy) and for adding songs which were not in the original. A major part of his criticism, like al-‘Ashari's, also returned to the unrefined aspects of the play. “I went to enjoy a Greek play by Aristophanes and found myself in one of those theatres that they set up in the village during *moulids*,” Etman said. He was also sad to see the main actor (whom he felt sorry for because he was a good actor) depart from the script and resort to *‘āfya* with the audience, a traditional technique in which the actors launched into spontaneous improvisation with members of the audience.<sup>17</sup>

This reaction of both reviewers echo the concerns about theatre and local performance traditions that exercised ‘Ali Mubarak as far back as the 1880s.<sup>18</sup> Although theatre in the 1960s was supposed to be more established, many of the same arguments about refined acting that we saw at the turn-of-the-century were being repeated. The difference was that, in the 1960s,

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<sup>16</sup> *al-Ahrām*, 7 March, 1968.

<sup>17</sup> al-‘Ashari's review appears in *al-Masrah* April 1967, 10–12. Etman's is in the same issue 13–17.

<sup>18</sup> pg. 30–31.

there were also critics who were vocal in their championing of these ‘popular’ arts. In this context let us turn to Yusuf Idris’ 1964 essays on Egyptian theatre and his attempts to promote these traditional ways of performances that the reviewers so disliked.

### Yusuf Idris’ ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’

In the first article in a series of three in *al-Kātib* magazine in January 1964, Yusuf Idris raised a simple question that “we always read in books and newspapers and hear at conferences: Is there truly an Egyptian Theatre? Does it really exist? Where is it hiding if it does exist? And *why* is it hiding?”<sup>19</sup> His three-part manifesto for the production of a new kind of Egyptian theatre took up this question in detail.

He told his own narrative of history of drama in Egypt and its origins. “Concerning the movement which is considered the true beginning of our contemporary theatre, we can say with all sincerity that it is the illegitimate child of [French] theatre.” As the Egypt theatrical movement went on it “came to add another floor to this building, with its European, French foundations that had been translated into Arabic. This time, it was a result of the influence of other theatrical schools: Czech and American theatre, as well as the theatre of Ibsen. The writing was surer of itself [*akthar tamāsukan*] and there were more Egyptian characters but the mould and the subject matter [*al-mawḏūʿ*] were still confined within Russian or French or American theatrical moulds.”<sup>20</sup>

This state of affairs worried Idris as he felt that, unlike objective scientific knowledge, art should be closely linked to “the people”. “Every people has [*li-kul shaʿb min al-shuʿūb*] its own particular nature, responding to which its arts are produced.” He adds that “art that we call global [*ʿālamī*] is nothing but European art.” He began the penultimate paragraph of the article saying: “So, art is something particular to all peoples and, as we have seen, is an inseparable part of the nature of every people. European theatre will stay European, from our perspective.”<sup>21</sup>

The article, however, did not propose abandoning theatre or totally rejecting any kind of performance. It called for a re-conceptualisation of theatre. Theatre, “that elevated space with the arch [*al-qabwa*], the stage, the actors and the plays, is one true kind of theatre but it is not every kind of theatre.” For Idris, people had a natural impulse to come together and enact some kind of performance. This theatrical impulse he called *al-tamasruh*, a derivation from

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<sup>19</sup> Idris, ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’, 597.

<sup>20</sup> Idris, ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’, 608 & 611.

<sup>21</sup> Idris, ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’, 612–14.

the word for theatre *al-masrah*. This kind of theatricality, he claimed in his section entitled ‘The difference between spectating and *al-tamasruḥ*’, must involve not just passive watching but participation from all those present. He compared it to Victorians balls which could not be called a ball if people simply sat and watch the dancing. It required everyone to participate.<sup>22</sup>

In this first article, he gave several examples of performative practices that had existed in Egypt for a long time but had not been associated with “Theatre”, in its European sense. In the village, for instance, there is the tradition of *al-sāmīr* a one-man act who performed skits and plays, often interacting with the audience around him. Also, in cities particularly, there was a long tradition of shadow-plays and other performance types. Idris promoted the use of the very thing that the 1967 performance of the *Clouds* (discussed above) was criticised for: namely, *’āfya*, a kind of improvised dialogue with the audience. He cited the case of early twentieth century vaudeville star ‘Ali al-Kassar, who would not follow the text as written but improvise as he went along. “Many people who saw al-Kassar’s plays, especially in the time he first started performing, must still remember how he sometimes used to stop the action of the play to tell a joke or enter into *’āfya* with one of the spectators.”<sup>23</sup> For him this interaction is a key part of traditional Egyptian theatre.<sup>24</sup>

He developed these ideas further in the two subsequent articles in *al-Kātib*. Eventually he used the ideas in this manifesto to write a play called *al-Farāfir* (*The Farfurs*) based on a traditional Egyptian clown-like character, not entirely dissimilar from the Commedia dell’Arte Harlequin. This play was first performed in 1964 and it has been discussed extensively in both English and Arabic scholarship. It is now considered a very important theatrical moment in 1960s Egypt; as Wen Chin Ouyang put it in 1999, “al-Farafir, now thirty five years old, remains a landmark in the history of Arabic literature.”<sup>25</sup>

Much of the scholarship on ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’ and *al-Farāfir* connects it to the post-colonial moment of the 1960s. Citing the work of Jacque Berque, Nadia Farag identifies the work as part of a “deep desire to recapture [Egyptian] ‘asala’ (authenticity)” after

<sup>22</sup> Idrīs, ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’, quote from 597. There is a longer discussion of *al-tamasruḥ* 600–02 from which the second quote comes.

<sup>23</sup> Idrīs ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’, 632.

<sup>24</sup> See again: Amin, ‘Egyptian Theater: Reconstructing Performance Spaces’.

<sup>25</sup> Nadia Raouf Farag, ‘Yussef Idris and Modern Egyptian Drama’ (PhD. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1975) focuses especially on this play. Wen-chin Ouyang, ‘The Imagined Modern Nation in Yusuf Idris’s al-Farafir’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (1999): 379–408 also offers a good overview of the play and its relationship to his ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’ (quote from 408). Samīr Sarhān, *Yūsuf Idrīs 1927-1991* (Cairo: GEBO, 1991), 477–560 collects a number of articles written about the play al-Farafir and his theories on Egyptian theatre.



the colonial experience and so as part of the process of decolonisation... Idris encourages Egyptian writers to search for their forgotten popular literature, and there they will find their authentic identity.”<sup>26</sup> Ouyang too notes that “[h]is anxiety was symbolic and symptomatic of the broad movement towards redefining Arab culture in the aftermath of the colonial encounter.”<sup>27</sup>

This text came at a particular political moment. It is soon after the publication of the 1962 National *Charter*, which summed up the Nasserist political goals for Egypt. It was also a detailed statement of what he thought Egypt’s identity and place in the world was. The third part of this text, which details the long the struggle of the Egyptian people, shows their history as one of resistance to foreign dominance over their country that had lasted for centuries until the final success of the revolution in 1952:

The Egyptian people, on the day their glorious revolution began on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1952, finally turned their back on those empty slogans that squandered their power and trod underfoot the different remains of the centuries of tyranny and oppression and they toppled, never to return, all the negativity that was stopping their will to remake their lives.<sup>28</sup>

This tyranny over the Egyptians has often been in the form of foreign powers. For Nasser, this was mostly represented by the Ottomans, Mamelukes, Muhammad Ali Dynasty and the European colonial powers of Britain and France. However, he did trace it back as far as the “Era of Roman and Greek control [over Egypt]”.<sup>29</sup> The resistance of Egypt (along with other Arab nations) to foreign invaders was a theme that Nasser picked up elsewhere. In a Speech in 1959 for the first anniversary of the United Arab Republic he says “This is the lesson of long history and continual struggle, brothers. The history of this region that we live in is an ancient one. The history of this region that we live in is a history of facing up to invading empires: The Greeks, The Romans, The Crusades, The Ottoman Conquest. The history of this region we live in is a history of facing up to Colonialism.”<sup>30</sup>

So, as the Nasserist project was showing a way for Egypt that can be independent of foreign domination (though he is keen to stress this not does not mean isolation from the

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<sup>26</sup> Farag, *Yussef Idris and Modern Egyptian Drama*, 109-11 citing also Jacques Berque, ‘Valeurs de La Décolonisation’, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 68, no. 3 (1963): 302–18.

<sup>27</sup> Ouyang, ‘The Imagined Modern Nation’, 380.

<sup>28</sup> Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, *al-Mithāq [The Charter]* (Cairo: Matba‘at Miṣr, 1962), 4.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, *The Charter*, 24–35. Quote from 24.

<sup>30</sup> Speech from 21 February, 1959. ‘Khutub Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir [Speeches of Gamal Abdel Nasser]’, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Accessed 28 December, 2016, <http://nasser.bibalex.org/Speeches/browser.aspx?SID=702&lang=ar>.

world), Idris was giving a model of Egyptian theatre that could represent itself for itself and not simply be a copy of foreign forms. He wanted to create a theatre that represented what he saw as the Egyptian character, free of foreign influence, including the Greek influence of the past.

### Idris and Brecht

Idris' work also produced a number of contemporary critical responses and engagements. People accused him of being simply anti-European. Louis Awad, for instance, suspicious of Idris' theoretical basis and his desire to create a pure Egyptian theatre, attacked him openly. He accused Idris of closing himself off to other cultures and trying to create an unrealistic and unattainable purity for Egyptian culture. Awad, in fact, also noted the irony that Idris' work seemed to prove, against what Idris was arguing, that Arabic literature could not be separated so easily from others. His short stories, for instance, did not look back to the Arabic writer al-Hariri but to the Russian Dostoyevsky. For Awad, this diversity of influence was a good thing. "If we wanted to have a popular revolution," he asks, "would it be necessary to build it on the revolutions of the Za'ar or the Harafish, as Ibn Iyas and al-Jabarti have related them to us, and to follow *their* conceptions of human rights? If we want to picture an ideal state must we go back to al-Farabi, Avicenna and Ibn Tufayl alone and ignore human intellectual and practical experience from Plato to Karl Marx?"<sup>31</sup>

Idris, however, strenuously argued that he was not trying to create a chauvinist Egyptian theatre that did not interact with other cultures. Some people, he thought, had wrongly criticised him, "claiming that I want us to close ourselves off and cut any intellectual or artistic links between us and Europe... and I don't know where this idea comes from." Rather, he was trying to create an original theatrical model that was authentically Egyptian. This tradition could and should then interact with other traditions but it would be on an equal basis, not simply a copy of theirs. He compared it to music. If he was proposing that Egyptians wanted to develop their own kind of music it did not mean he would want them stop listening to Chopin or Tchaikovsky. This was just the same.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond Idris' theorising there was also the issue of the play that he produced as a result. In *al-Farāfir*, many have struggled to see a pure, authentic Egyptian play. Awad saw the

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<sup>31</sup> Luwīs 'Awad, 'Farfūr: Yurīd an Yuwaqqif Ḥarakat al-Aflāk' [A Farfur who wants to stop the movement of the stars] in Luwīs 'Awad *al-Thawra wa-l-Adab* [Literature and Revolution] (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1967) and *al-Ahrām*, 29 April, 1966. Referenced here in Sarḥān *Yūsuf Idrīs* 526–38. Quote from 528.

<sup>32</sup> Idrīs, 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre', 615.

influence of several western writers from Aristophanes to Beckett on Idris' work. Of course Awad was pleased that, even if Idris paid lip service to what Awad saw as a closed nationalism, the result was a global piece of work. "I say to Yusuf Idris that there is no need for that [creation of a pure Egyptian theatre] because I am convinced that, of all the writers in our new theatre, he is the closest to the idea of a theatre that transcends time and place."<sup>33</sup>

Others have noted that, despite Idris' claims to pure Egyptian authenticity, the play had several "European" aspects. 'Abd al-Fatah al-Barudi asked "The words [of the manifesto] are truly very important, but were they achieved in the play?" He concluded that they were not. "Even the beginning, which seems new is not. The speech that the director gives at the beginning has been used by ancient theatre in something called the "prologue".<sup>34</sup> Rajā' al-Naqqāsh was blunter in his criticism. He asked "what distinguishes the play 'al-Farafir' from the western form?" The answer was simple: "Nothing".<sup>35</sup>

There was one name that particularly comes out in these critiques: Bertolt Brecht. During the 1960s Brecht was "a dominant presence" and probably the most influential European playwright and theorist in Egypt.<sup>36</sup> He became particularly popular in the late 1960s but, even before Idris' work was published, he was a well-known writer whose plays had been performed and works discussed in Egypt.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> 'Awad 'A Farfur Who Wants to Stop the Movement of the Stars' in Sarhān, *Yūsuf Idrīs* 526–38. Quote 538. Awad says that Idris' use of the trope of descending to talk to the dead comes from Aristophanes. He must, here, be referring to *The Frogs*, as text which Awad published his own translation of in 1964.

<sup>34</sup> 'Abd al-Fatāḥ al-Bārūdī, 'Masraḥiyyat al-Farāfir' in *al-Risāla* (11 June, 1964), 26–28. Reprinted in Sarhān *Yūsuf Idrīs*, 477–82. Quote from 478.

<sup>35</sup> Rajā' al-Naqqāsh, *Fi Aḍwā' al-Masraḥ [In the lights of the Theatre]* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1965), 106–135. Reprinted as 'al-Farāfir wa-l-Masraḥ al-Ghāḍib' [al-Farafir and Angry Theatre] in Sarhān, *Yūsuf Idrīs* 495–519. Quote from 498.

<sup>36</sup> Magdi Youssef, 'Brecht's Theatre and Social Change in Egypt (1954–71)', *Arab Stages* 1, no. 1 (2014): n.7 details several articles on the playwright including the December 1968 edition of al-Masraḥ wa-l-sīnimā in which "all the drama articles ... were devoted to Brecht". Emad el-Din Abd el-Hady, 'The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht on the Egyptian Theatre during the 1960s' (PhD. Dissertation, University of London, 1993), 93–95 has a list of a large number of translations of Brecht and articles about him from 1960s Egypt. Quote from Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, 141.

<sup>37</sup> The 1963–4 season at the pocket theatre in Cairo began with a version of Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule*, which is discussed by Abd el-Hady, *The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 149–61. However, there had been discussion of Brecht in Egypt before then. Youssef, 'Brecht's Theatre and Social Change' (in main-text and n.3) make reference to a radio introduction to *Mother Courage* in 1960 and a discussion of *The Life of Galileo* and his theory of Epic theatre on Radio Cairo in 1957. Abd el-Hady *The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 89 mentions two articles in *al-Majala* of 1957 on Brecht. In 1962 Kurt Veth visited Cairo and according to Youssef, 'Brecht's Theatre and Social Change', "Veth found that not only Egyptian actors, directors, and set-designers, but also writers, and journalists had a strong and genuine interest in Brecht's theatre". Abd el-Hady

The spectre of Brecht lies behind both Idris' theorisation in his manifesto and its embodiment in the play *al-Farāfir*. Emad el-Din Abd el-Hady in his PhD on Brecht in Egyptian theatre, examines Idris' attempts to break down the wall between audience and performance and his rejection of a form of theatre in which the actor is asked to simply *become* the part he is playing (a style that turned theatre school into "factories, producing wholesale spare parts" instead of proper actors). He finds that this view has strong parallels in Brecht's writing. The lack of empathetic acting could be seen as Idris' take on the Brechtian Alienation effect, which depends on the necessary disparity between the actor himself and what he is portraying. Idris' attempts to break down the barriers between the audience and the performers, likewise, seem to echo Brecht's idea of Epic theatre which "takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into [the] relationships [between stage and public, text and performance, producers and actors]."<sup>38</sup> Abd el-Hady says bluntly that "there was little doubt he was influenced by Brecht first and foremost" and that "the thrust of Idris so-called theory of al-Tamsruh [sic] was derived from Brecht."<sup>39</sup>

This observation is often taken as a proof that Idris' goal of finding an authentic Egyptian theatre was flawed from the beginning, since he relied on a German theorist to create it. This is Abd el-Hady's conclusion when he says that "because he was driven by delusions caused by his nationalistic bias, Idris was adamant in denying such western influences - Brechtian or otherwise - on both his ideas and the play. His experimental attempt therefore amounted to plagiarism..."<sup>40</sup>

However, there is no need to become mired in a debate about whether or not this so-called Egyptian theory of performance was actually "European". If Idris was inspired by Brecht, this does not automatically invalidate the Egyptian-ness of his theory or of his play. Rather, a more productive way to look at the relationship between Brecht and Idris is similar to the relationship between early twentieth century theatre and its European models, as conceptualised by the earlier theories of translation in this thesis. Early Arabic theatre, in its

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*The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 147, however, disputes Youssef's claim in 2014 and in a 1979 article in *Proceedings of The 7th Congress of The International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Milan V. Dimic & Juan Ferrate, that this visit "played a major role in popularizing Brecht in Egypt". He speculates that Youssef might have conflated Veth's visit in 1962 with his one in 1968, when he co-directed a version of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which was more important in popularising Brecht.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'What Is Epic Theatre? [First Version]', in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 1–14. Quote from 2.

<sup>39</sup> Abd el-Hady, *The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 318–30. Quotes from 326 and 320.

<sup>40</sup> Abd el-Hady, *The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 340.

“translation” of European plays managed to reconceptualise Egyptian performances traditions (in that case, singing) as part of theatre.

In a similar but more programmatic way, in the 1960s Idris was asking Egyptians to do a similar thing. He wanted them to view performance traditions like *al-sāmīr* not only as ‘folk performance’ but as something that could be a part of “theatre”. He may have been more able to do this by adapting the theories of people like Brecht but this does not mean he was simply copying Brecht or just reproducing a European style. Instead, his own translation of Brecht’s theories allowed him and his audience to reconceive of different Egyptian performance styles and make them a part of their contemporary stage. Using similar intellectual bases, he could produce a very different, Egyptian result.

Even if Abd el-Hady eventually concludes that Idris was copying Brecht, he does also give room for this more charitable reading:

The fact remained that it was the arrival of Brecht's theatre at that time which led Egyptian dramatists to recognize those techniques as valuable dramatic assets hidden in their own culture. In fact those dramatists who hailed Idris's call for reviving Egyptian theatre used the Brechtian example in their argument against pro-western writers and critics who dismissed Idris's call. The revivalists argued that if such a renowned western writer as Brecht had acknowledged those techniques and re-introduced them in a new context of his, why should not the Egyptian theatre follow a similar experimental path and be true to its own heritage.<sup>41</sup>

Thus we can bring Idris closer to the earlier pioneers of Egyptian theatre, whom he dismisses as bastardisers. They were, perhaps, more similar in their approach than Idris accepts. Neither was creating a simple copy of European theatre. Both were influenced by European modes and theories of performance but in their translation to the Egyptian context they managed to shed some light on their own ‘indigenous’ performance traditions. This, importantly, closed the gap between “drama” and other performance traditions which had been ignored.

### ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’ and the Greeks

Idris’ manifesto was a central text of 1960s Egyptian theatre and, as such, has been analysed in depth from many of the angles discussed above. However, there is something else important in the series of articles which is seldom discussed: Idris’ engagement with ancient Greek literature in ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’.

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<sup>41</sup> Abd el-Hady, *The Influences of the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 325–36.

The first thing to note about Idris' views on Greek theatre is that, for him, unlike some other writers covered in this thesis, Greek theatre was inseparable from 'European' theatre. There may be, in his view, many types of theatre but "one kind [of theatre]", what is now seen as European "developed at the hands of the Greeks." In Idris' history of the theatre, Greek drama's path was stalled by the coming of Christianity, which saw it as pagan. But it managed to survive this and "Greek theatre came back again after the Middle Ages and it got its Shakespeare and Molière."<sup>42</sup> "What was Greek, became European and from there it spread to the whole world. But," Idris goes on, "this spread and its acceptances across the world do not mean that no other kind of theatre has developed among other peoples that performs the same social function that created Greek theatre."<sup>43</sup>

For Idris, Greek theatre was not a part of Egyptian literature and, in fact, is alien to the spirit and traditions of the Egyptian people. To illustrate his point, he took tragedy – and the story of Oedipus specifically – as an example. "Nothing confirms the fundamental difference between Egyptian theatre and Greek theatre (and from that European theatre) like our understanding of tragedy as a people":

Greek tragedy is a kind of theatre in which the Greek wanted to portray the heroism of man as he resists or fights his fate. It always starts from the assumption that the hero is some accursed victim or that some divine fate has been written for him that he will kill his father, for example, and marry his mother.

He compares this to the Egyptian hero and finds it very different:

Our tragic hero here, in Egypt, in the Arab world, or in the East in general is different. He is not the victim of some cruel or arbitrary fate. The hero here is a true hero, not for the heroic deeds that he does, but because he has his own fate in his hands and can guide his own life.<sup>44</sup>

The passage is particularly rich for a number of reasons. His insistence on the self-reliance of the Eastern hero can be read as a statement of the new found post-colonial self-reliance. Idris' Arabic hero is "not victim to anyone or to any external power [*quwwa khārija 'anhu*]"'. This is the hero of a new self-confident Egypt that is not controlled by foreign powers or influences but that controls its own future. It is a post-revolutionary hero. As Nasser wrote at the beginning of the seventh chapter of his 1962 *Charter*:

Gone, never to return, is the time when the fate [*maṣīr*] of the Arab nation and its people is decided in foreign capitals and at the tables of international

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<sup>42</sup> Idrīs, 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre', 597–98.

<sup>43</sup> Idrīs, 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre', 599.

<sup>44</sup> Idrīs, 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre', 636–37.

conferences or in the bastions of the forces of reaction [*quṣūr al-raǧʿiyya*] allied with imperialism.

The Arab man [*al-insān al-ʿarabī*] has regained his right to make his own life by revolution.

The Arab man will decide his people's fate for himself...<sup>45</sup>

There are parallels too with Helene Foley's analysis of the American adaptations of Oedipus. She talks of a "tension between Oedipus as an innocent victim of the gods and the ideal American citizen, who optimistically struggles to earn his or her way in the world and to be rewarded for virtue and hard work." There are clear similarities between this American view of the tragic hero and Idris' Arabic hero, now treading his own way in the world.<sup>46</sup>

There must also have been a sense of relish for Idris, like Tawfiq al-Hakim before him, to fight back against the western stereotype of "the Arab mind" being bound to a view of the world as a product of uncontrollable fate. On the contrary, Idris argued, it is the European universe that does not give man power to act.<sup>47</sup>

However, in the context of this thesis it is his rejection of what he saw as the basis of Greek tragedy which is important and allows us to see this ground-breaking set of articles alongside work we have already looked at. For example, if we read this alongside Tawfiq al-Hakim's introduction to his adaptation of Oedipus we can see that many of the same concerns arise. Al-Hakim, like Idris, did not believe that Egyptians could simply translate other models and expect to come up with an "Egyptian" theatre. "[S]imply transposing Greek dramatic literature to the Arabic language does not take us towards the foundation of an Arabic dramatic literature," he says. "[The] goal is drawing from the spring then swallowing it, digesting it and acting it out. Then we can produce it to the people again, dyed with the colour of our thought, imprinted with the stamp of our beliefs."<sup>48</sup>

However, in al-Hakim's case, creating an Egyptian theatre did not preclude looking to Greek models. In fact, as discussed in chapter four, he argued that because of their "religious feelings" Egyptians might be better placed to understand Greek tragedy than Europeans. Idris rejected this attempt to claim the Greeks for Egypt. This was the crux of their differing

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<sup>45</sup> ʿAbd al-Nāṣir, *The Charter*, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Helene Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 160–89. Quote from 160.

<sup>47</sup> For al-Hakim on issues of fate see pg. 137–41 in this thesis.

<sup>48</sup> al-Ḥakīm, *Oedipus the King*, 31–32.

constructions for Egyptian theatre and by focusing on it we can see both how they are engaging with very similar questions and why they come up with such different answers, Idris' included a wholesale rebuilding of the theatrical genre for Egypt whereas al-Hakim's tried to lay claim to existing forms.<sup>49</sup>

Yusuf Idris' view of the Greeks was making an intervention in debates about historical identity that had been central to many of the earlier writers in this thesis. In its insistence that the Greeks had nothing to do with modern Egypt, it was the counter-point to Taha Hussein's construction of Egypt as a Mediterranean society. Idris' view also got implicit endorsement in Nasser's writings particularly of the 1960s. In his *Charter* of 1962 Nasser expressed Egypt's place in the world thus:

Our people are an Arabic people and its fate is linked to the unity of the Arab Nation.

Our people live on the north east gate of revolutionary Africa [*ifrīqiyā al-munāḍila*] and it is not possible to live in isolation from its political, social and economic development.

Our people belong to two continents in which the greatest liberation battles are being fought, and these are the most significant features of the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

Egypt's possible Mediterranean history is effaced and only the Arab and African parts of Egypt's history are invoked. This is due, in large part, to the politics of resistance and Third-Worldism that Nasser was trying to invoke. In his earlier work *Philosophy of a Revolution* he went into more detail about how he saw Egypt's place in the world and split it into three different circles [*dā'ira*]. The first and smallest was an Arab circle, then an African one and the largest (though least well defined) was the Islamic circle. There is no Mediterranean or European circle.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that later in the 1960s Tawfiq al-Hakim wrote his own model for Egyptian theatre *Our Theatrical Mould* which proposed more traditional forms of performance, based on local traditions. However, even in this he did not reject Greek theatre and he suggested that these performance moulds be used to act out classic European texts. The first one he suggests is Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. For more on this interesting text see Girolamo Pugliese, 'Un Canone per Il Teatro Arabo: Una Lettura de Qālabu-nā al-Masrahī Di Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm' (PhD. Dissertation, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2009). See esp 99–131 for discussion of the text.

<sup>50</sup> 'Abd al-Nāṣir, *The Charter*, 149.

<sup>51</sup> 'Abd al-Nāṣir, *Philosophy of the Revolution*, 111–14.



Between 1953, when *Philosophy of a Revolution* was published, and 1962, when the *Charter* was published, Nasser's general construction of Egyptian identity did not change greatly; his rejection of the Greek history of Egypt, however, became more pronounced. In *Philosophy of a Revolution* he was comfortable talking about cultural exchange between ancient Greece and Egypt working in two directions. In the earlier book, the history he constructed after the Pharaohs included a period of "interaction between the Greek spirit and our spirit [*tafā'ul al-rūḥ al-yūnānī ma'a rūḥinā*]" which was then followed by the Roman invasion. In contrast, his *Charter* simply mentioned a uniform period of "Greek and Roman control", no longer speaking of a time of co-operation between Greeks and Egyptians. When he wrote in the *Charter* about the European science that came to Egypt with the French invasion, Nasser noted the debt that so-called 'European' scientific progress owed to previous culture. Interestingly, he did not mention the usual genealogy of Greek contribution to European science at all but said that "The Pharaonic and Arabic were foremost among [their influences] [*al-fir'awniyya wa-l-'arabiyya fī muqaddimatihi*]"<sup>52</sup> Idris' theory was formed in this atmosphere that denied connections between modern Arabic and ancient Greek cultures.

### Ali Salem and Greek Theatre

The two competing ways of looking at Greek history, embodied in Hussein and Idris, were not the only possibilities. There are several different ways to construct the potential history of cultural contact between Greeks and Egyptians and Ali Salem's 1970 *Comedy of Oedipus* was one instance of another viewpoint that was gaining popularity in the 1960s. Echoing the earliest arguments from the nineteenth century, people were rediscovering the idea that Greek culture was, perhaps, just a bastardised version of ancient Egyptian culture. Far from being alien to Egypt, it was an Egyptian creation. Furthermore, the argument that theatre, as we know it, was also created in ancient Egypt – whence it moved to Greece – began to be discussed in intellectual circles.

This direct link between Greek tragedy and ancient Egypt was an idea that went back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. The first man known to have proposed it was M. Georges Bénédict in his guide book to Egypt.<sup>53</sup> However it was Étienne Drioton who was the most studious promoter of the view. He published works in 1938, 1942, 1948 and 1954 on the subject, arguing that some Egyptian religious festivals included elements of dramatic

<sup>52</sup> 'Abd al-Nāṣir, *Philosophy of the Revolution*, 64. 'Abd al-Nāṣir, *The Charter*, 24 & 26.

<sup>53</sup> M. Georges Bénédict, *Guides-Joanne : Égypte* (Paris : Librairie Hachette, 1900), vol. 1, 99 : "Le rapport qui unissait en Grèce le théâtre et la religion donne fort à penser aux possibilités d'un théâtre égyptien."

performance that enacted different religious myths and stories. He also argued that he had managed to reconstruct the action of several of these plays through early play scripts.<sup>54</sup>

I do not intend to attempt to resolve the question of whether or not there was such a thing as ‘ancient Egyptian theatre’. It seems clear that some kind of performance existed but whether it only took place inside temples and whether it bore much resemblance to theatre as we know it, is debatable. A good summary of the evidence, and the points for and against, has been laid out by Ronald J Leprohon, who concludes that “The answer to the question of whether ancient Egypt possessed theater in the Greek sense remains elusive. There were certainly dramatic re-enactments of mythical stories, but to what extent it is difficult to say. The so-called scripts, with the possible exception of the Triumph of Horus from Edfu, seem more like accompaniments to detailed ritual functions than dramatic texts.”<sup>55</sup>

In the 1960s the nature of ancient Egyptian Theatre became a prominent topic of debate in Arabic speaking literary circles. In 1967 the minister of culture Tharwat ‘Ukasha translated Drioton’s *Ce que l’on Sait du Théâtre Égyptien* into Arabic as *al-Masrah al-Miṣrī al-Qadīm* [Ancient Egyptian Theatre]. In a later edition ‘Ukasha added his own long introduction explaining how he first got to learn about ancient Egyptian theatre. It was on a trip Paris in 1963 that he first heard the academic work on this subject and he was taken aback that he was only hearing about it now. It is clear that ‘Ukasha was in agreement with Drioton’s views. He talks about the religious plays enacting the story of Isis and Osiris, which developed into something closer to what we would call “theatre”. He says in the introduction that “Indeed the birth of theatre in Egypt is rooted deep in the past and there is no doubt that it precedes its birth among the ancient Greeks... The first ‘tragedy’ that appeared on the ancient stage dealt with the character Osiris and the tortures that he endured.”<sup>56</sup>

In an article in 1982, Hiyam Abu al-Husayn, describes her feeling when she, like ‘Ukasha, was first confronted with the information that there was theatre in ancient Egypt in a

<sup>54</sup> Étienne Drioton’s works include *Ce que l’on Sait du Théâtre Égyptien* (Cairo : Editions de la Revue du Caire, 1938) ; *Le Théâtre Égyptien* (Cairo : Editions de la Revue du Caire, 1942) ; *Nouveau Fragments de Théâtre Égyptien* (Cairo : Editions de la Revue du Caire, 1948) ; ‘A la recherche du théâtre de l’ancienne Égypte’ *Arts Asiatiques* vol. 1 no. 2 (1954), 96–108. The last one of these is the most accessible and includes a summary of many of the arguments and also translations of the texts he says are preserved parts of play scripts (using the work of Kurt Sethe).

<sup>55</sup> Ronald J. Leprohon, ‘Ritual Drama in Ancient Egypt’, in *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and beyond: From Ritual to Drama*, ed. Eric Csapo and Margaret Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 259–93. Quote from 285.

<sup>56</sup> Tharwat ‘Ukāsha, *al-Masrah al-Miṣrī al-Qadīm [Ancient Egyptian Theatre]* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Tarjama, 2009). First published 1967. Quote from the introduction to the new edition (written in 1988) 22.

French periodical in 1961. “How surprised I was and how great was my delight when it was made clear to me that Egypt had given theatre to the world.”<sup>57</sup> Su‘ād Abyaḍ’s biography of George Abyad also narrates a highly-stylised argument that took place between a young Abyad and his uncle, who is trying to convince him to give up his youthful dreams of the theatre. Abyad then counters with some arguments which seem much more inspired by contemporary debates from when the book was published (1970) than the time the argument was supposed to have happened (turn-of-the-century). “Didn’t you know too that the art-form, which they claim was born at the hands of the Greeks and does not go back beyond them, was in fact present in Pharaonic times?”<sup>58</sup>

Many writers were sceptical about the claims, attempting to limit the performances to the realm of religious rites, within temples, instead of calling it theatre. Yusuf Idris’ in his manifesto, for instance, expressed his doubts about the nature of this theatre, saying it was done behind closed doors in temples. He did not want to draw this connecting line between Greece and Egypt, maintaining his view that Greece was European and alien to the Egyptian character. He said that “Greek theatre was as different from this Egyptian theatre as Greek religion was from Egyptian religion.”<sup>59</sup>

One person who was clearly inspired by this theory was Ali Salem. The introduction to his *Comedy of Oedipus* references ‘Ukasha’s translation of Drioton and takes inspiration from the ideas in it. He was interested in ancient Egyptian theatricality in a very broad sense and in a personal interview I conducted with him he talked in depth about E.A. Wallis Budge’s *Egyptian Tales and Romances*. This includes a translation of several Egyptian stories including one called “The Appeals of the Wronged Peasant Khunanpu”, often known as “The Eloquent Peasant”.<sup>60</sup> Ali Salem held this up as another very early form of theatre. “Scientists look at it as wisdom ... words... No! it was a drama. It was a story and it was *a play*. This is the first comedy on earth... When you read it, as an Egyptian, you discover it at once.”<sup>61</sup>

This new genealogy of theatre formed an important background to Salem’s adaptation of *Oedipus*. There was also another theory that prompted him to adapt the play *Oedipus*

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<sup>57</sup> *al-Fuṣūl*, 01 June, 1982, 13–20. Quote from 13.

<sup>58</sup> Abyaḍ, *Jūrj Abyaḍ*, 61.

<sup>59</sup> Idris, ‘Towards an Egyptian Theatre’, 599–600.

<sup>60</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances* (London: Butterworth, 1931).

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with Ali Salem February 7, 2014. He said that he also translated the story into Arabic and published it but I have not been able to locate it.

*Tyrannos* specifically. In 1960 the eccentric Russian scholar and polymath Immanuel Velikovsky published a work called *Oedipus and Akhnaton*, which was translated into Arabic in the late 1960s. The main argument of Velikovsky's book is to prove the Oedipus myth was, in fact, based on the true history of Egyptian pharaoh Akhnaton. The origin of the Sphinx was the Egyptian Sphinx and that the Thebes of the story was not the Greek but the Egyptian city.<sup>62</sup>

Ali Salem combined these two theories to inform his own adaptation. He moved the action to the Egyptian Thebes and set it in ancient Egypt rather than ancient Greece. In a double pronged movement he asserted both that Greek theatre was based on an earlier Egyptian model and that the myth of Oedipus, too, was based on Egyptian events. In his introduction to his play he explicitly connected these two things, saying that he “would not be at all surprised to discover one day that Sophocles’ Oedipus is nothing more than a Greek adaptation, albeit a very good one, of an Egyptian play that portrays the same events. It could have been a play that the priests of the temple of Amon directed and maybe they showed it to some important people.”<sup>63</sup>

His interpretation of the place of Greek literature in Egypt was unlike that of either Idris or al-Hakim. He did see that Greek plays can be part of an Egyptian theatrical tradition but this was not because, like al-Hakim, he saw them as a neutral base that could spawn either European or Arabic drama but because he thought that Greek tragedy *was* Egyptian. Therefore, as an Egyptian (and specifically as an Egyptian rather than an “Arab” or an “Easterner”), he could lay claim to it.

I have already argued that, in the interwar period, Greek history and literature were fertile ground for Egyptian writers to work through what being an Egyptian writer meant. Dialogue with the Greeks proved very fruitful, not because they gave easy answers but because they gave complex ones. In the new political and cultural context of Nasserist Egypt, the questions were not entirely the same but the Greeks remained important. Writers were asking how a country now independent of European political control could exert their own cultural independence. Did they need to come up with “authentic” models? If so, how might they do that?

As we can see from these three figures – Idris, al-Hakim and Salim – ancient Greek literature in Egypt bears the weight of many different aspects of these questions at the same

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<sup>62</sup> Immanuel Velikovsky, *Oedipus and Akhnaton: Myth and History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960). Translated into Arabic in Fārūq Farīd, *Ūdīb wa-Akhnātūn* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1968).

<sup>63</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 11–12.

time. In one sense, as Yusuf Idris saw, Greek Drama was a European import that does not have a long history in Arabic literature. Thus, it represented the cultural forms of the coloniser not the colonised. Yet, as Tawfiq al-Hakim noted, it does not need to be conceived of as European. Greek tragedy was part of a pre-European Eastern Mediterranean culture which could be open to anyone. In fact, al-Hakim even argued that, due to their spirituality, Egyptians were better placed than the French to appreciate a play like Oedipus. Finally, one could note, as Ali Salem did, that Egypt had a long history itself and a history of contact with Greece that well predates any European engagement. Ali Salem claimed the roots of Greek tragedy for the Egyptians. Ancient Greece carries this double-edgedness (or triple-edgedness, or more!) and this is why it can be such a productive way into the debates of twentieth century Egyptian theatre in its many different political contexts.

### *The Comedy of Oedipus: Plot*

Let us turn to the play itself, *The Comedy of Oedipus* [*Kūmīdyā Ūdīb*] or *You're the one who Killed the Beast* [*Anta illī 'atalt al-Waḥsh*].<sup>64</sup> While theories about the origins of the story and of Greek theatre are certainly relevant, the play is better seen in relation to the other versions of the Oedipus story, both Egyptian and ancient Greek. Like many other writers, Salem was reforming the Egyptian dramatic tradition of *Oedipus Tyrannos* to discuss the political issues of the late 1960s. His changes to the traditional course of the Oedipus myth were in places so radical that *The Comedy of Oedipus* has been accused of having little to do with Sophocles' play. I argue that his drastic reworking of the play should still be viewed alongside both the Greek original and Egyptian adaptations

The first striking change was, as we have seen, the change of setting from ancient Greece to ancient Egypt. Of all the plays discussed this is the one where we have the most details about the performance and the setting and the costumes of the characters are those of ancient Egypt. The first line of the script runs "Place: ancient Thebes ... The Thebes in Egypt and not the Thebes in Greece."<sup>65</sup> The director, Galal al-Sharqawi [b. 1934], says in his memoirs that in the stage and costume he wanted them to be "combination of modern and Pharaonic" So people wore modern clothes "decorated with Pharaonic elements".<sup>66</sup> This is

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<sup>64</sup> These are the two titles that the play is referred to as. When first performed in 1970 Galal al-Sharqawi convinced Ali Salem to make the title *You are the one who Killed the Beast* because it would appeal to audiences more than *Comedy of Oedipus* see al-Sharqāwī, *Hayātī fī-l-masrah* pt. 1 vol. 1, 632. Subsequent texts have printed both. i.e. *The Comedy of Oedipus: You are the One who Killed the Beast*.

<sup>65</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> al-Sharqāwī, *My Life in the Theatre*, pt. 1 vol. 1, 637.

also the only play, of those which I have focused on, that is written (predominantly) in Egyptian colloquial Arabic. This further adds to its 'Egyptian' feel, if not strictly to the ancient Egyptian context.

As the play continues we realise that Ali Salem is creating a much more radically different version than a simple change of location. The character of Jocasta, for instance, barely has a part in the story. She is the queen of Thebes who marries Oedipus after he solves the riddle of the Sphinx but she is not related to him. After he becomes king, Oedipus basically ignores her and al-Sharqawi says that he had to convince Ali Salem to add a scene where Jocasta can feature in order to give her more stage time.<sup>67</sup>

The removal of the incestuous relationship from the play is an interesting development of the move started by Haykal and Hafez to bring issues of fate and prophecy into the sphere of Egyptian national politics. When I asked Ali Salem why he removed this aspect of Oedipus and Jocasta's stories from his version of the play he said, at first, that he did not feel he could show that kind of relationship on the Egyptian stage. Then, almost correcting himself, he added that in fact he "did not need it for [his] dramatic journey". In the same way, he rejected the oracle given to Oedipus before he was born. "I cannot talk to people in these days ... about destiny and fate; that people are pre-destined to so-and-so-and-so. Destiny is what we do."<sup>68</sup> This, like Idris, evokes the self-confidence of post-revolutionary Egypt and a rejection of outside control. However, I argue that the ideas of fate and destiny are not removed from his adaptation entirely, they just find different ways to be worked through.

Just as Haykal and Hafez had moved the idea of fate and Oedipus' oracle away from the personal sphere and shifted it to power, rule and the state, so Ali Salem turns his play into an interrogation of power, rule and democracy, without totally expunging issues of fate and destiny. The action begins with the Sphinx terrorising the city of Thebes. It is posing a riddle that no-one can solve. Oedipus, a newcomer from outside Thebes, volunteers to solve the riddle in return for the throne of Thebes. If he is put in charge, Oedipus says: "I will bring [Thebes] five thousand years forward. I will invent everything that humans will invent in five thousand years' time. In short I will make civilisation ... civilisation ... printing presses, cars

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<sup>67</sup> al-Sharqāwī, *My Life in the Theatre*, pt. 1 vol. 1, 633–34. He convinced Ali Salem to write a scene between Oedipus and Jocasta which would come at the beginning of Act 2 Scene 4. Ali Salem also added a scene in which Oedipus accuses Jocasta of inciting the murder of her previous husbands and Awalih, the chief of police who carried the murders out, confirms it. These scenes do not survive in the printed versions. Al-Sharqawi refers to the performance script in his notes.

<sup>68</sup> Personal interview with Ali Salem, 7 February, 2014.

aeroplanes, electronics, telephones, the wireless....”<sup>69</sup> Eventually he persuades the people of Thebes to agree to his deal and he solves the riddle of the Sphinx and becomes ruler of Thebes.

As he comes to the throne Oedipus wants to bring about a new kind of rule. He wants to abolish the system of divinely ordained rulers who are destined to be kings because of their blood line. He says that he instigating a new system, one based on the consent of the people. “The people must agree to my appointment,” he stipulates before he comes to power.<sup>70</sup> However, once he has been put on the throne the bureaucrats and lackeys who surround him resort to the old system of power. The high priest Horimheb discovers some ancient documents in the temple archive that confirm Oedipus’s divine right to rule. Despite his protests, the priests reveal that the name Oedipus occurs seven times in temple records which means that “it is certain that he is descended from the gods.”<sup>71</sup>

So, although in very different ways to Sophocles’ play, despite Oedipus’ attempts to escape his destiny (in this case to rule as a divine king), it keeps recurring. As the action continues, the chief of police, Awalih, also resorts to his old methods of suppression and the first act closes with him orchestrating the disappearance of an old friend of Oedipus whom he sees as politically dangerous.<sup>72</sup>

In the second act we move into the future, the five thousand years into the future that Oedipus promised in the first act. There are televisions, telephones, radios and more. However, it has also turned into an authoritarian state. All the inventions are being used to create crude propaganda for Oedipus as the great hero who defeated the Sphinx. His attempts to reform or change the system are being used to continue it. As Tiresias says near the end of act two:

The prevailing tune is now Oedipus and the murdered monster. Everyone is singing one song to the new Pharaoh who cut time short by five thousand years. The people of Thebes have begun to enjoy inventions which others won’t see for a very long time. The city council has exploited these inventions well to implant the desired tunes into the minds of the people... and to fill their stores with money at the same time.<sup>73</sup>

Oedipus might have invented all the glories of the modern world but the people still rely on the old political system of a divine pharaoh, who is predestined to rule the city, in part

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<sup>69</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 44.

<sup>70</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 44.

<sup>71</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 51.

<sup>72</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 56–57.

<sup>73</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 83.

due to the scheming of Oedipus' advisors. When he tries to challenge them, Horminheb tells him:

All the educational syllabi at every level say this... it's impossible to change ... the prayers say it ... all our customs, songs and stories say it ... it is a pyramid, my lord... a pyramid of beliefs and conceptions and a very big one at that. The whole pyramid is built on one rule: that the Pharaoh is a god.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the technological advances, Oedipus cannot change the political system or his own fate.

As the play draws to an end, the people's ideas begin to evolve. At the end of the second act the Sphinx returns again to attack Thebes. It dawns upon the people that they are going to have to find a new system to deal with it. Both Oedipus and Tiresias try to convince them that, instead of relying on a ruler to save them "the people must undertake to defend themselves against the monster."<sup>75</sup> Oedipus' first step is to banish the police chief Awalih, who has been trying to maintain the old monarchical system. However, this is not enough and soon afterward Oedipus himself leaves power. The play closes with Creon, the head of the army, running off to face the Sphinx alone and to his own certain death. Tiresias says in the epilogue:

Creon has paid the price ... the price that has meant the people of Thebes understand that death is necessary for the sake of life and that in death man loses nothing but his fear... Thebes will for evermore be the property of its people who have finally got to know the solution [to the riddle].<sup>76</sup>

This adaptation radically changes the plot of *Oedipus Tyrannos* in a number of ways, beyond simply moving it to ancient Egypt. On a narrative level, it does not follow the Aristotelian unity of time. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* is all set on a particular day, long after the Sphinx has been vanquished (though a plague is ravaging the city). This play starts with the appearance of the Sphinx and carries the story far past that to a return of the Sphinx (which is not in Sophocles' original). Also several characters with no analogues in the original play are added such as the police-chief Awalih, the poet Senefru, the high-priest Horimheb and the head of the chamber of commerce, Onah.<sup>77</sup>

All this has led people to suggest that it is not useful to see this play an adaptation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* at all. But, in fact, I want argue that Ali Salem's adaptation is closely linked

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<sup>74</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 78.

<sup>75</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 100. Tiresias speaks these lines but in a previous speech Oedipus has said something similar.

<sup>76</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 116.

<sup>77</sup> I follow the transliteration of of Carlson, *The Arab Oedipus*, 2005.



both to the Egyptian tradition of Oedipus, as I have explored it in this thesis, and to the original text.

### Very good, but is it Oedipus?

When it was performed in February 1970 the play was a great success.<sup>78</sup> Apparently, even though the minister of culture Tharwat 'Ukasha banned people from reviewing it after the first few weeks for its political messages, the play "was more successful than could have been imagined."<sup>79</sup> From the text, to the director, to the actors, all received glowing reviews. One commentator said that it was "Like a ray of sunshine in the sky of our theatre"<sup>80</sup>. Another said that "The directing was on a level with the best plays in Paris"<sup>81</sup>. The play was not merely well acted and directed but as a whole it was striking too. One reviewer said that it could "move modern theatre in a comedic direction, not one that mixes tears and laughter [i.e. tragicomedy] but one that highlights the irony inherent in the concept of theatre as a whole."<sup>82</sup>

Despite the general positivity about the play many of the reviewers questioned its relationship to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. How are we supposed to take a version of Oedipus that removes Oedipus' murder of his father and marriage to his mother and then his subsequent discovery of this fact?

Ibrahim Hamada, who had himself written his PhD on French and Egyptian adaptations of Oedipus, was critical of the playwright's engagement with the Greek original.<sup>83</sup> He said of Ali Salem's play that "He removed the spirit, depth and the form (both general and specific) from the story and turned it into a simple, weak story that had no relationship to the original essence [of the play] except in a few names of characters and details of a few marginal events." He concludes his review by saying that "If the play *You are the One who Killed the Beast* had not tried to compete [*tatamahhak ... fi*] with the myth of Oedipus and if it had not been published with an introduction which claimed it was the legitimate son of that excellent Greek story, then the review might say something different."<sup>84</sup> Another reviewer said "In my opinion, [Ali Salem's] play would not lose anything if we took away the name Oedipus and

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<sup>78</sup> Galal al-Sharqawi collected many of the reviews in al-Sharqawī *My Life in the Theatre*, pt. 2 vol. 1, 617–703.

<sup>79</sup> al-Sharqawī, *My Life in the Theatre*, pt. 1 vol. 1, 638.

<sup>80</sup> 'Abdullah al-Tūkhī in *Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr* (26 February, 1970).

<sup>81</sup> Daya' al-Dīn Bibris in *al-Kawākib* (3 March, 1970).

<sup>82</sup> Jalāl al-'Asharī in *al-Masrah* (March 1970).

<sup>83</sup> Ibrahim Hamada, 'Treatments of Sophocles' Oedipus the King in Contemporary French and Egyptian Drama' (PhD. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1968).

<sup>84</sup> Ibrāhīm Ḥamāda in *al-Masā'* (27 February, 1970).

called it something else ... Ibrahim the King for instance ... In fact, it might be *better* for the play to take away the name of Oedipus.”<sup>85</sup> Scholar of Arabic literature Mustafa Badawi agreed with these reviewers, noting that “It is a deliberately grotesque version of the legend, which retains hardly any of the ingredients of the original story”. He continues “It is not very clear why ‘Ali Salim has chosen the Oedipus legend as a framework for the play, unless it be to mystify the censor, for ... he certainly does not attempt to offer a reinterpretation of the ancient legend.”<sup>86</sup>

In a more conciliatory tone, the critic ‘Ali al-Ra‘i wrote this in his introduction to the play in the 1977:

In 1966 in New Delhi Dr Ebermann,<sup>87</sup> the actor from the German Democratic Republic, stood up to talk about Bertolt Brecht.

The event was the UNESCO East-West Theatre Convention, set up to look into forms of theatre in the East and the West.

Ebermann said: use Brecht without holding back. Take from him what you can and what is suitable to your situation and leave the rest, of course.

Ali Salem has heard this advice and he has been happy to take on its central principle. Now we see him applying it to Greek myth.<sup>88</sup>

It is this interpretation which seems to offer a better way to understand the play than denying any connection between *The Comedy of Oedipus* and *Oedipus Tyrannos*. He might not have been precisely following the Greek story but he was certainly taking certain things from it that were “suitable to [his] situation”. It is important, in other words, that he was adapting Oedipus the King and not just giving us “Ibrahim the King”. But, the question is: what, exactly, he is getting from earlier versions of Oedipus.

In terms of the genealogy of the Oedipus story in Egyptian theatre up to 1970, it is clear that Ali Salem is using the play in similar ways to how Egyptians had used it before. One key theme running through all these versions is the exploration of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Egyptian versions of the play –George Abyad’s implicitly Tawfiq al-

<sup>85</sup> Rajā’ Naqqāsh in *al-Kawākib* (March 1970).

<sup>86</sup> Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, 202-204.

<sup>87</sup> Wolfgang Ebermann. Not in fact a Dr. but referred to as a “playwright and publicist” in the programme for the UNESCO East-West Theatre Seminar and Festival. Al-Rā‘ī seems to refer to him as Akermann in the Arabic (أكرمان).

<sup>88</sup> ‘Alī al-Rā‘ī, ‘Introduction’ in ‘Alī Sālim, *Kūmūdiyyā Ūdīb: Anta Illī ‘atal al-Waḥsh* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1970), 7–10. Quote from 7. This is an earlier edition than the one used in the rest of this thesis.

Hakim's and Ali Ahmed Bakathir's more explicitly –have used the play to ask how a society should be ruled and what role the ruler has in this.

Salem's play followed quite obviously in these footsteps. In fact, despite the attempt he makes in the introduction to argue that he is inspired by Velikovsky's *Oedipus and Akhnaton*, the plot does not seem to have been too closely inspired by the contents of this book. Velikovsky's work hinges on his argument that Akhnaton's incest was the inspiration for the Oedipus story but this is the precisely the element that Salem has removed from his version of the play. If he was influenced by this book at all, it was in an oblique way.

The play might be, as Badawi argues, "a deliberately grotesque version of the legend" but it still has much in common with *Oedipus Tyrannos*; it is still a version of the legend. Salem's decision to call the play "The *Comedy* of Oedipus" is a clue to what he is trying to do with it. When he says "Comedy", he does not mean the New Comedy of playwrights like Menander and subsequently Plautus, Terence and Shakespeare, which focusses on domestic social issues and rounds off to a happy ending. His comedy is more in the style of Aristophanic political comedy, which satirises political events and public figures. Although Salem is not specifically using this play to engage with the theories of comedy against tragedy, turning this version of the play into a comedy follows those theories of comedy that argue that it is a genre for the common man, in contrast to the aristocratic genre of tragedy.<sup>89</sup> The focus for Ali Salem becomes much more on the people, partly in the plot of the play but also in the intended audience, which is the people of Egypt. This adds more significance to the fact that it is the only version of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, in this period written (almost) entirely in colloquial Egyptian Arabic rather than Modern Standard.

Ali Salem's Oedipus was a comic, political version that had updated the aims of the play for the Nasserist era. The director, Galal al-Sharqawi said of it that "the message is as clear as the sun. Oedipus is Gamal Abdel Nasser."<sup>90</sup> In the post-1967 period of disillusion with the system, Ali Salem was sending a message to the people in several different ways. His Oedipus character, who technologically advances Thebes without advancing its mentality, was a clear reference to the Nasserist drive to "progress", which has failed to show the desired results. He was also trying to tell "the people" that despite the system's democratic pretensions it still placed one man at the top of the system and deferred all decisions to him. Egypt could

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<sup>89</sup> This view is often based on Aristotle's declaration in *Poetics* 1449a-b that Tragedy is the imitation of heroic action, while Comedy is the imitation of the common people.

<sup>90</sup> al-Sharqāwī, *My Life in the Theatre*, pt. 1 vol. 1, 629.

not advance until it had learned not to rely on this single ruler. Ali Salem urged the people to take the burden of power on to its own shoulders. The fact that he is using Oedipus to say this is not merely coincidence, nor is it an attempt to avoid the censor.<sup>91</sup> He is relying on a tradition of Egyptian Oedipus and updating its message to the politics of 1970.

Ali Salem's political message, however, is not beyond reproach. His apparently populist stance could also be read as, in fact, a kind of elitist disdain for the ordinary people. Mahmoud el Lozy, who also agrees that the play is "indisputably an allegory of the Nasser period", analyses the play in depth and finds it wanting. As well as pointing out a number of structural holes in the play, el Lozy says that "however hard [the play] tries to project a progressive outlook, [it] really reflects a very narrow and conservative perspective... Salim's 'populism' collapses quite early on in the play and his distrust of the masses comes fully to the foreground as we reach the final act." In the action of the play "the people" were more often than not portrayed as fickle, easily led and naïve, a feature we saw in al-Hakim's version too.

When it comes to a political programme, el Lozy criticises Salem for only really dealing in idealistic terms (like "creation of a new man") and not having any concrete ideas for change. He also accuses the final act of contradicting the previous message of the play. Instead of wanting to give power to the people, el Lozy argues, it is "tinged with a romantic yearning for a new great man to replace the defeated one." Ultimately, he does not consider the play at all politically subversive but one that only promotes a "impotent laughter [that] essentially protects the system it ridicules."<sup>92</sup>

Many of el Lozy's criticisms are valid. There is a tension in the play between wanting to give power to the people and considering them naïve and easily led by others. The sense that comedy can act as a safety valve that protects the very systems it ridicules is also a pertinent one in Egypt and elsewhere. However, there is something else that needs to be explored. El Lozy, like almost all other critics, repeats the verdict that this play's relationship

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<sup>91</sup> Using a Greek tragedy to make your point was no guarantee that your play would be staged. Louis Awad mentions in 'Problems of the Egyptian Theatre' in Robin Ostle ed. *Studies in Modern Arabic Literature* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1975), 179-193 (esp. 192) that a 1970 production of Aeschylus' *Persians* was banned because it showed an Eastern king defeated and was too close to the bone after the Egyptian defeat in 1967. Ali Salem himself jokes about this view that people set their play in history to avoid official scrutiny. The playwright Senefru tries to prove that there is no censorship "I said, in my last play, the boldest things possible. I did not use symbols or resort to historical events [to make my point]" (38). Such a clear direction to the censor would not be in if he was seeking to avoid problems.

<sup>92</sup> Lozy, 'Brecht and the Egyptian Political Theatre'. On this play esp. 57-63.

with Oedipus as tenuous at best. “It is quite evident that the basic elements of the Sophoclean model are absent in Salim’s version,” he notes. Then he goes on to add “Nor is the play a parody of Oedipus, for what may be perceived as burlesque elements with respect to Sophocles’ play only function as isolated moments in the text and do not inform the play as a whole.”<sup>93</sup>

We have seen how Salem was developing the traditions of earlier adaptations of the Oedipus story but let us see how the play can also be read more specifically against Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Firstly, Ali Salem had clearly read and studied Sophocles’ play. The introduction to the play not only cites Sophocles’ play (in Ali Hafez’s 1967 translation) but also Fuad Dawwarah’s critical work on Oedipus and the adaptations of Cocteau and Gide. It is of course possible, even if strange, that Ali Salem might do this research and ignore it but it is worth asking: what if we read the play as engaging on more than a superficial level with Sophocles’ original? How does that change our interpretation of it?

After his removal of the incest plot of the play, which is often seen as the central theme of Sophocles’ original, it is easy to understand why people think Salem’s version bears little relation to the original. But ideas of fate, destiny and self-knowledge, that were also important parts of the original, still hang over the play. Tied to this idea of destiny in Sophocles’ play is Oedipus’ own journey of discovery to discover his fate. It has been argued that this journey towards self-discovery – or Oedipus’ dogged search for “the truth” – is the central part of Sophocles’ dramatic journey.

As Vernant has noted, the original play itself is a kind of riddle. Sophocles seems to have been innovating when he tied the story of Oedipus to the riddle of the Sphinx and, as such, it is an interesting lens through which to look at the play. As much as anything, we can say it is a play about knowing oneself and not just for Oedipus, perhaps for us all. Goldhill has noted the several different layers to the pun on Oedipus’ name. It could be “swollen foot” (from οἰδεω and πους) because of his scared feet that are a result of his ankles being pinned together when he was exposed on Mount Cithaeron as a baby by Jocasta and Laius. The pun could also have a connection to the Greek word for knowing/ knowledge: οἶδα. This could be a subtle clue that Oedipus should know his feet (οἶδα πους) which are the clue to his origins.

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<sup>93</sup> El Lozy, ‘Brecht and the Egyptian Political Theatre’, 58.

Or, it could be an exhortation to “know where” (οἶδα πού) he came from and a broader clue that the play is all about self-knowledge.<sup>94</sup>

There is a clear irony that the answer to the Sphinx’s riddle that Oedipus solves so easily is “man”, even though he cannot see his own predicament. Ali Salem, too, sees the importance of this answer in the play. In his introduction, he writes that “there is one answer to all riddles posed in this world, one answer to all challenges in all ages... “man” [*al-insān*].”<sup>95</sup>

Since the “truth” that Oedipus seeks in Salem’s adaptation cannot be that of his relationship to his mother and father (the theme of incest having been omitted), we must find another place to look for it. I argued above that the idea of fate and politics have moved closer together in this play. So, the “truth” becomes a political truth: that the people should not rely on one man but reform themselves into a kind of democratic system (although Salem does not use this terminology) where everyone takes responsibility. The play is about Oedipus’ journey to reach that conclusion and his slow realisation that he cannot lead the city alone but must step back. If we look at the play in this way, then we can answer a number of the criticisms that have been levelled at it by el Lozy and others.

El Lozy criticises Tiresias as “perhaps the most disconcerting character in the play” and adds that “there is certainly no need for a Tiresias endowed with prophetic powers once the original structure of the myth and its supernatural elements have been cast aside.”<sup>96</sup> However, although there might not be the element of fate, we can still find a place for Tiresias’ prophetic powers. Towards the end of act one, as Oedipus is about to go out and solve the riddle, Tiresias gives a speech which, in the context of the play, proves prophetic:

Oedipus is ready to solve the riddle and solve the problem of the monster. But what about the monster inside you? Who is going to kill that? That foolish monster that always makes you wait for someone to come along and solve your problems for you?<sup>97</sup>

This is Tiresias’ moment of foreknowledge, in the context of Ali Salem’s reworking. The external monster has been eliminated from *The Comedy of Oedipus* and the threat is internal. This idea finds important resonances in earlier Egyptian adaptations too.

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<sup>94</sup> Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 216–19. See also: Laszlo Versényi, ‘Oedipus: Tragedy of Self-Knowledge’, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 1, no. 3 (1962): 20–30.

<sup>95</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> El Lozy, ‘Brecht and the Egyptian Political Theatre’, 58.

<sup>97</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 47.

The fact that Oedipus is on a slow journey to discovery of the truth in this play can also explain some, if not all, of the “contradictions” (as el Lozy says) of Oedipus’ character. In particular, we can see why, for the dramatic development of the play, Salem needs to have Oedipus “[close] his eyes to Awalih’s brutal disposal of his troublesome friend [and ignore] the internal affairs of Thebes.”<sup>98</sup> We can explain why Oedipus just focuses on his scientific discoveries if we say that, like the Oedipus of Sophocles, he is unaware of the true nature of things until the end. He needs to discover that simple scientific progress does not necessarily mean progress in all aspects of life.

Following the course of Sophocles’ play becomes particularly useful when looking at the very close of the play which has troubled more people than el Lozy alone. If we put Salem against Sophocles we can argue that the final act, in fact, does not betray a “romantic yearning for a new great man to replace the defeated one.” In fact it is a statement of the opposite that is based on a deep intertextuality with Sophocles.

As the play draws to a close, at the end of act 3 scene 2, Oedipus makes a speech. He is nearing the end of his quest towards the truth and has banished the corrupt police chief from Thebes. There is, however, one more thing he needs to learn: “

I want to tell you some truths. Awalih [police chief] has been expelled from Thebes. This means that there is no place for fear among us. There will not be anything in Thebes that stops the development of the greatness and creativity of man. There is another truth that you need to understand in order to defeat the Sphinx: it’s not possible for one human alone to kill the beast that attacks cities.<sup>99</sup>

Then at the beginning of the next scene, before he has said or done anything else, Oedipus begins to lose his sight:

**Oedipus:** How faint the light is in the palace tonight. I can’t see very well.

**Creon:** Indeed, my Lord... the torches are not at full strength

**Oedipus:** It’s strange I can’t see well at all ...

...

Take my hand, Creon; show me the door. I thought it was the light that was faint ... (*in distress*) Ha!... I didn’t know the world could hold so much darkness.

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<sup>98</sup> El Lozy, ‘Brecht and the Egyptian Political Theatre’, 61.

<sup>99</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus*, 112.

The final words he says are “Go back Creon” and then “that is an order, the last order that Oedipus will give” and then he exits.<sup>100</sup>

If one does not read this alongside Sophocles’ original, it might appear a strange scene. It is a very quick exit and we are never really told what happens to Oedipus afterwards. However, if we know the plot of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* then it takes on much more significance. Firstly, Oedipus’ loss of sight must be connected to his dashing out of his own eyes after he sees Jocasta’s corpse in Sophocles’ play. After he discovers the truth his eye sight is lost, engaging with the tropes of visual sight and knowledge in Sophocles’ play.<sup>101</sup> So, in Ali Salem’s dramatic trajectory, once Oedipus has discovered the truth (that “no individual on his own can kill the beast that attacks cities”) he loses his sight. Then he leaves the stage. As we know from Sophocles, he is not merely going back into the palace but he is leaving into exile, away from the city. He is as good as his word that he will reject the rule of a single man.

If we turn to the very end of the play, Sophocles can help us again. The last scene (before Tiresias’ epilogue) has provoked a lot of controversy. In it Creon goes by himself to defeat the Sphinx but gets killed. Tiresias says that this shows that people must be willing to die for the community. However, el Lozy argues that “this development is in direct opposition to the conscious message of the play on individual heroism.” He does not find the solution offered by Tiresias’ speech convincing as it “seems to suggest that Creon’s suicide mission was equivalent to a solution of the problem raised by the play.”<sup>102</sup> Creon’s death certainly does seem problematic and the director, Galal al-Sharqawi, was also troubled by it. He tried to change this ending, arguing that he “saw in this individual effort to tackle the problem a total attack on the message of the play. For the play said that you should not on one individual to save the city”. Al-Sharqawi thought that this individual focus was just shifted from Oedipus to Creon. However, he was eventually over-ruled, with Ali Salem saying that Creon represented “the necessity of every individual taking responsibility and paying the price,” not that the city needed an individual to save it.<sup>103</sup>

The plot of Sophocles’ play also helps explain why this ending is not necessarily a complete reversal of the message of the play; there is an interesting reading to be extracted from the relationship between the two. In *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Oedipus himself is about to be sent into exile but the whole system of monarchy continues. The person who takes control of

<sup>100</sup> Sālim, *Comedy of Oedipus* 114–15.

<sup>101</sup> This is a theme Salem has used earlier in the play. In Act One Tiresias taunts Awalih saying “I am only blind in the eyes Awalih, whereas you are blind in the heart” (34).

<sup>102</sup> El Lozy, ‘Brecht and the Egyptian Political Theatre’, 59–60.

<sup>103</sup> al-Sharqāwī, *My Life in the Theatre*, pt. 1 vol. 1, 635.



the throne is Creon, who then, after the action of the play, (in the traditional version) rules Thebes through the troubled times brought about by Oedipus' children. In Ali Salem's version, though, after Oedipus' departure into exile Creon sends himself to die on a suicide mission. So, we do not just end with the death of an ordinary man but the death of the man who should be the next king. In Ali Salem's version the people are now forced to rely on themselves due to Creon's sacrifice.

Many of el Lozy's criticisms of the play still stand: its populism may be patronising at best and there are still several points in the plot which do not quite fit together, the most salient being Jocasta's role in the whole drama, which starts off appearing to be important and then all but disappears. However, if we view this play directly alongside the ancient versions of the story, several of the things that seemed either inexplicable or ill-conceived start to make a lot more sense. It may be, as Badawi asserted, a "deliberately grotesque version of legend" but, in turning much of the play on its head, it is still a conscious "version" and should be read as such.

### Conclusion

Ali Salem's Oedipus came at the end of the Nasserist golden age for Egyptian Theatre. It was a time when deep questions were being asked about what Egyptian theatre ought to be in the new era of independence. It has also been one in which Greek theatre was, again, a frequent touchstone for Egyptian writers. Some, like Yusuf Idris, have reacted against it and others, like Ali Salem, laid claim to it. As was the case throughout the twentieth century, it was in dialogue with Greek history and culture, and particularly through the figure of Oedipus, that theatre practitioners were able to debate the complexities of post-colonial cultural production in the 1960s.

Ali Salem's play entered into the tradition of the Egyptian Oedipus in a surprising new way. Even though almost all the critics who have looked at the play write off its connection to Oedipus as superficial, I have argued the opposite. If we see this play both as having a deep and conscious relationship to Sophocles' original and, importantly, also being their heir to a 70-year tradition of Egyptian engagements with the story of Oedipus, we can interpret it much more clearly. Ali Salem was using the *Oedipus Tyrannos* as it had been used by others before him, to work through ideas of power and rule in the new context of Nasserist Egypt. The relationship to the source text might be complex, even inverted, but it is certainly not superficial and Sophocles' text is a necessary companion to *The Comedy of Oedipus*.

### **Conclusion: Return of the Absent**

“The final exit of the [Oedipus Tyrannos] seems to me to be one of the most problematic stage directions in Greek tragedy,” argued Oliver Taplin. The action of the play all appears to be building up to an obvious dénouement; Oedipus, once his identity has been discovered, must suffer the fate of blind exile for the rest of his life. So strong is this narrative drive, coupled with our knowledge of the events of *Oedipus at Colonus*, that many modern readers have come away with the impression that Oedipus leaves Thebes at the end of the play. However, a closer reading of the text makes it clear that, instead of his expected exile, Oedipus returns to his Theban palace and closure is postponed until after the end of the dramatic action.<sup>1</sup>

The delayed resolution and the gesture towards an uncertain future are hallmarks of many Sophoclean plays. The open-ness of the endings of many of his tragedies has been the subject of frequent comment. The closure that he appears to be working towards is undercut at the end with codas that reach into unresolved futures. This is the case in the original *Oedipus Tyrannos* and it is also the case with the story of Egyptian adaptations of the play.<sup>2</sup>

The reader of this thesis might now be expecting a pleasing narrative conclusion to the story of Oedipus in Egypt. We might imagine that, after the early experiments of Egyptian theatre, Oedipus made it through the troubled political mid-century to the safety of incorporation into the canon in the Nasserist era. Alternatively, bearing in mind Ali Salem’s view on the primacy of ancient Egyptian theatre over Greek tragedy, we might imagine a circular narrative through which nineteenth century constructions of the relationship between Greece and Egypt return strengthened. However, as Sophocles’ plays show us, even something that appears to have a satisfactory conclusion is always unstable. It is as true of Oedipus in Egypt as it is of *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

To illustrate this let us turn to Fawzy Fahmi’s play *Return of the Absent* [‘*Awdat al-ghā’ib*’].<sup>3</sup> Even the chronology of this play and its production disrupt a clear sense of an ending.

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London: Routledge, 2003), 31–32. First published 1978. Malcolm Davies, ‘The End of Sophocles’ O.T.’, *Hermes* 110, no. 3 (1982): 268–78. The debate about the significance of this dénouement has continued and also includes questions about the authenticity of the ending: David Kovacs, ‘Do We Have the End of Sophocles’ “Oedipus Tyrannus?”’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129 (2009): 53–70; Alan Sommerstein, ‘Once More the End of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 131 (2011): 85–93.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah H. Roberts, ‘Sophoclean Endings: Another Story’, *Arethusa* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 177–196; Pat Easterling, ‘The End of the Trachiniae’, *Illinois Classical Studies* 6, no. 1 (1981): 56–74.

<sup>3</sup> Fawzi Fahmī, ‘*Awdat al-Ghā’ib* [Return of the Absent] (Cairo: GEBO, 1977).

Written in 1968, before Ali Salem's version of the play, the rights were eventually bought by the national theatre organisation in 1971 and it was first acted in 1977.<sup>4</sup> So, as a play, it already straddles the chronological end of this study, 1970. The action of the play also confirms that the issues raised in the earlier versions of this play have not been put to bed but can be resurrected for fresh interpretation.

The play is split into three acts and, although it is clearly based on Sophocles' play, alters several details of plot and chronology. The first act, entitled "knowledge" [*al-ta 'arruf*]<sup>5</sup>, is set soon after Oedipus has defeated the Sphinx and is on the throne of Thebes. The harvest is about to happen and the inhabitants of the city are happy, all except Creon who, with the help of Tiresias, has been trying to put himself on the throne. This is, therefore, the first Egyptian version to realise Oedipus' specific fears in Sophocles' play that Creon has designs on the throne and is plotting with Tiresias to get it. In Fahmi's version Oedipus discovers about the oracle and that he has killed his father and is married to his mother all within this first act.

The second act, called "the decision" [*al-qarār*], reprises Tawfiq al-Hakim's story line of the continuation of Oedipus and Jocasta's relationship after the revelation of their true connection. Fahmi, however, moves away from al-Hakim's unpopular solution to give another one. First Jocasta tries to convince Oedipus to end the relationship but cover up the truth from the people. Then she proposes that he should start a relationship with a member of the royal household called Originia (who it has been stressed in the play is not a blood relation of either of them<sup>6</sup>). Meanwhile, Tiresias and Creon continue their plots against Oedipus.

The final act is called "the plague" [*al-ṭā'ūn*]. A plague hits Thebes and Tiresias tries to manipulate the council of wise men and to convince the city that the plague has descended because of the pollution brought on by Oedipus' actions. Tiresias and Creon reveal that they know the truth of Jocasta's relationship to Oedipus and she kills herself, tortured by the shame the revelation would bring. Then they attempt to replace Oedipus with Creon on the throne. Oedipus admits his crime but argues against the idea that the gods could punish a whole city for the crimes of one man. Eventually the schemes of Tiresias and Creon are revealed and the people can choose their leader. The chorus tells Oedipus to leave Thebes for the sake of the city. The wise men, who had been so manipulated by Tiresias and Creon, protest. They argue

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<sup>4</sup> A video of the performance is available: 'Masraḥiyyat 'Awdat al-Ghā'ib [Return of the Absent]', Ṣawt al-Qāhira [Sono Cairo], Accessed 28 December, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnbVfrUnXq4>.

<sup>5</sup> The Arabic word literally means "getting to know" so the title of this act is essential the *anagnorisis* of Aristotle.

<sup>6</sup> Fahmī, *Return of the Absent*, 35.

against the Chorus and tell Oedipus he should rule because he is “the great saviour of all Thebes”. Oedipus, in a speech, which expresses sentiments familiar to audiences of previous Egyptian “Oedipuses”, replies:

This does not mean Democracy [*Dīmuqrāṭiyya*] should bow before my power. Thebes should make its own fate and practice its own freedom. Know that the path before it is not strewn with roses. Thebans, I will not go against what you have decided. You reject me and this is your right if your freedom is not to be just an illusion or a chanted slogan. Your true victory will be in keeping up this amount of courage and practicing your freedom in other similar situations to increase your consciousness.

After a long speech exhorting them to prepare for the tough fight for democracy he leaves saying “Goodbye new Thebes, in whose dust I hope my grave will lie.”<sup>7</sup>

The Oedipus of this play does not resemble Nasser quite so clearly as does the Oedipus in Ali Salem’s play, but it is hard not to read the symbolism of Oedipus leaving the city in this way against the politics of the late 1960s. In 1967, after the defeat to Israel, Nasser had resigned but returned to office after public protest. In Fahmi’s play, Oedipus does not respond to calls for him to return but leaves the city to the people.

This play also enters many of the debates we have seen in earlier chapters and it uses many of the same theatrical techniques. In the chorus, whose members, in two well-constructed scenes, stand below the high palace gate and cry out for their rulers to come and help them, we see the same issues of the relationship between the people and the ruler that we first saw in George Abyad’s version. By putting the chorus down low and making them call up to the palace the power relationships are spatially represented. When Oedipus leaves at the end, these relationships are reversed as he descends the stairs off the stage the chorus stands over him, bidding him farewell.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to reusing and reworking Tawfiq al-Hakim’s attempt to continue Oedipus and Jocasta’s relationship, Fahmi also asked many of the same questions about religion that dominated Bakathir’s version. Oedipus questions how a just god could do such things to him as Tiresias and Creon hide behind the cloak of religion to pursue their own nefarious ends and manipulate the people.<sup>9</sup> We can see that this 1977 adaptation revives and connects many of the ideas that the history of Oedipus in Egypt had already excavated.

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<sup>7</sup> Fahmī, *Return of the Absent*, 135–36.

<sup>8</sup> Fahmī, *Return of the Absent*, 120 & 122–23.

<sup>9</sup> Fahmī, *Return of the Absent*, 125–132.

This was not the only post-1970 version of *Oedipus Tyrannos* presented to Egyptian audiences. In 1975 at the Opera House Muhammad Subhi directed and starred in his own version of Oedipus which spanned a long period of Oedipus' story. He incorporated elements of *Oedipus at Colonus* and of *Antigone* into the drama and even included a dream scene which showed Oedipus killing Laius at the crossroads.<sup>10</sup> In 1993 another version of the play appeared in an upstairs room at the National Theatre.<sup>11</sup> 2011 saw a new version of Oedipus based, again, on Velikovsky's *Oedipus and Akhnaton*, called *Oedipus in Egypt*, directed by Sabri Saad el Hamus. However, despite a few performances in the Netherlands it was never performed in Egypt.

The place of Greek history in Egypt has also been constantly reimagined by Egyptians. In 1987, the debate moved to the English-speaking world when Martin Bernal published his controversial book *Black Athena*, which argued (in part) that ancient Egyptians had colonised Greece and that Greek culture was more Egyptian than European.<sup>12</sup> In 1995 Bernal was invited to Cairo to address a conference on comparative literature and participate in a round table discussion. Since his book argued similar things that Egyptian writers had argued before, he might be expected to have received a good welcome but the classicist Ahmed Etman was dismayed to see the assembled Arabic linguistic scholars turn on Bernal and attack his work. They argued that his scholarship was not based on solid facts and one particular scholar called it *darwasha*, which translates roughly to the flighty ravings of a Sufi dervish. Etman felt that this unnamed scholar was talking to Bernal as if the latter was simply one of those mad men who searched Alexandria, Siwa or elsewhere for the tomb of Alexander the Great. Convinced that the reason for these attacks was these scholars lack of detailed knowledge of the text itself, Etman decided that he needed to publish an Arabic translation, which appeared in 1997.<sup>13</sup>

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The story of *Oedipus Tyrannos* – his constant searching for the truth of his identity – and its parallels in the attempts of Egyptian writers and theatre practitioners to find what it meant for them and their theatre to be *Egyptian*, has guided the questions of this thesis. These modern riddles, unlike those posed by Oedipus' sphinx, have no straightforward answer.

<sup>10</sup> *al-Masrah wa-l-Sinimā*, July 1975. In Wahba, *Hellenic Drama in Performance*, 23–26.

<sup>11</sup> This is the play that is the prompt for Selaiha, 'Manifold Oedipus'.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). For reactions against the work see: Mary R Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Bernal, *Athīna al-Sawdā': al-Judhūr al-Afrūāsyawiyya li-l-Ḥaḍāra al-Kilāsikiyya*, trans. Aḥmad 'Atmān (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā li-l-Thaqāfa, 1997), 16.

Questions of cultural history and identity can offer empowering ways to construct your place in the world or they can be manipulated by those in power, like the Sphinx's riddle in so many of the Egyptian adaptations we have seen. Yet, despite the impossibility of definitive answers, these questions can appear to dominate a nation, just as the Sphinx's did in Thebes.

By focusing on certain productions of this Greek tragedy, I hope to have revealed new information and explored new readings of several important plays in the history of Egyptian theatre. I have also used these specific productions to view some of the largest cultural debates of late nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt from a different angle. This play has provided a rich case-study to look at specific examples of how Egyptian theatre practitioners of the period were engaged in the formation of their national drama and what issues they were forced to confront. These include such questions as whether theatre as a genre should be considered a European import, what the place for local performance traditions was on the Egyptian stage and what purpose the theatre served in a society. Using a model of translation that focuses on its role in forming the target language, we have also seen how Oedipus' Egyptian journey helped reshape and change Egyptian theatre and how Oedipus himself was reshaped and changed.

The fact that this play was originally written in an ancient Greek context has been a crucial element of my analysis. I have argued that the debates about the place Greek literature and history in Egypt are extremely rich and nuanced but underutilised ways to re-examine its nineteenth and twentieth century cultural history and specifically the development of drama. Because of the unarguably important place of Egypt in the history of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean and the long and complex history of Graeco-Egyptian relations, it gave writers a deep vein of material to mine for ideas about nationalism, colonialism, cosmopolitanism and politics. The protean nature of historical Greek interaction with Egypt, ranging from military occupation to intellectual influence, meant that it could be used in several different ways for different ends. With its conflicted legacy, Greek history can also allow us a way to deconstruct the usual dichotomies of East and West, Europe and the Middle East.

*Oedipus Tyrannos*, too, is a play whose specific narrative and action offered fruitful possibilities for writers and theatre practitioners. It allowed them to think through religious debates, moral questions and political structures that were already important topics for discussion in twentieth century Egypt. One theme has emerged in Egyptian adaptations above all the others. Oedipus as a mythical figure and as a theatrical hero has been used consistently to question and attack the idea of monarchical, one man rule. The people of Thebes, sometimes in an uncomfortably paternalistic way, were used by writers and theatre practitioners to call

upon their audiences to stop putting their faith in one man and take responsibility for their own future. In short, it was used to ask what the best kind of governance for a state was.

In different ways, this political message is what unites all the versions of *Oedipus Tyrannos* discussed in this thesis. On the surface, it is a democratic rallying call. However, as Mahmoud El Lozy argued about Ali Salem's *Comedy of Oedipus*, it is also combined with a lingering distrust of the people. All these Egyptian versions of Oedipus, to varying degrees (Bakathir less than Salem or al-Hakim) put some blame on the people for having allowed themselves to be led by these charismatic rulers. In none of the adaptations of the play is the Sphinx a real enemy; the enemy is always within the city and the character of the people. However, the final initiative to find a solution is always given to Oedipus and not to his people. It is Oedipus who decides to leave rather than the people who force him out. In fact, the people are sometimes the ones begging him to stay.

This exact political message, however, does not always need to be the central part of an Egyptian Oedipus, even if it is to remain politicised, as I discovered in informal conversations I had in Egypt as I wrote this thesis. Perhaps in reaction to the way I argued the play has been used in Egypt, and certainly in reaction to the construction of the leader as a "father-figure", another interpretation of the play emerged. Egypt, people told me, needs to become Oedipus, to destroy their father figure and his patriarchal rule. This new political reading of the play opens up exciting possibilities for future adaptations of the play.

*Oedipus Tyrannos* will always remain open to new interpretations. Through this ancient play people in Egypt and elsewhere have constructed their present and their future – and can continue to do so. His unwillingness to be quietly laid to rest is one of the Egyptian Oedipus' defining strengths. It is a spirit that is embodied in the opening and closing lines of Naguib Surur's poem 'The New Oedipus' [*ūdīb al-jadīd*]. These lines, which portray Oedipus alive although surrounded by death, will also close this thesis:

I go, my love. One country lifts me up  
 And, my love, another country sets me down  
 Country after country  
 Death cultivates the way; every inch is a tomb  
 ...  
 But I am here; I am here; I am here and I have not died

I am here and I am not dead.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Surūr, *The Human Tragedy*, 96–98.



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